ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1906, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 134 NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 10, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST'S OUTLAW

or Stella to the Rescue

"Watch him, Ted!" cried Stella as she rode out to meet Ted. "He'll kill you if you give him the rein."

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King of the Wild West's Outlaw;

OR,

STELLA TO THE RESCUE.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

AN EVENING'S DIVERSION.

"I reckon I got ther best frawg in this yere settlement."

The speaker was a slender young fellow dressed in a cowboy costume. His jet-black hair swept his shoulders and was crowned by a wide white sombrero, turned up jauntily on one side. His lean, intelligent face had been burned the color of a cigar by wind and weather on the Wyoming range. He had a humorous mouth, but his eyes, black, large, and brilliant, told of a passionate temper when he was aroused.

"Cal'late you all mean toad, don't you, Frisk?" asked one of the men which comprised the group that lounged in front of the Cow-punchers' Rest, the leading hotel of Silver Plume, Wyoming, on the evening of a warm Western day.

The Cow-punchers' Rest was the best hotel in Silver Plume because it was the only one there. The other component parts of the town were a corral, an outfitting store, six saloons, and five gambling-houses, the latter all closed.

Besides these evidences of the material there were several residences better than are usually seen in towns of that character in Wyoming, and back of the town the spire of a little white church raised toward the sparkling blue Western sky. The residences were the property of wealthy ranchmen in the neighborhood, whose wives lived in the town in order that their children might go to school.

So it happened that the "good people" were in the majority in the elections, for the cow-punchers and freighters who claimed it for headquarters had no voice in the government of the town.

Where the "good people" were in the majority in other places in the West, the gun and the fist of the other element usually overruled them.

Not so in Silver Plume, for the "good people" there were as strenuous as they were decent, and the wealthy cattlemen had been cow-punchers themselves in their earlier days, and had looked many times down the muzzle of a six-shooter, so that they were not afraid of a blue barrel now, and, moreover, were just as handy with a weapon as ever they had been.

So it was that the "good people" controlled the government of Silver Plume to their own satisfaction and the disgust of the saloon-keepers and gamblers, who had once incited the punchers and sports who hung about the town to rise and strike for liberty—that is, the right to gamble openly and conduct the town in a generally riotous manner.

Louis

The result was disastrous to the "Legion of Hell," as the Reverend Cassius Volney called them.

The Reverend Mr. Volney, to whom every gambler and cow-puncher now took off his hat, had been a cowboy himself not many years back, and he could "knock the eye out of a fly at a hundred yards" with his revolver yet, as one of the cow-punchers admiringly described the reverend gentleman's prowess with the universal weapon of the golden West.

At the last election in the town the "Reverend Cass," as he was called by the opposition, was elected mayor, and Tad Ferguson, whose reputation as a "bad man" extended from the Pacific Coast to the Mississippi River, became city marshal, much to his surprise, elected on the same ticket with the "Reverend Cass."

Tad Ferguson was known as a gun-fighter, and practically invincible. Marvelous tales were told of his dexterity with a gun. He could "fan" a six-shooter faster than any man on the range, and never wasted a cartridge.

When notified of his election Tad objected vigorously, and declared that he would not accept the office, but the "Reverend Cass" sent for him, and Tad went to the clergyman's house reluctantly.

He knew Mr. Volney by sight only, and, to use his own words, he "didn't have any use for sky pilots nohow."

But this was only because he had lived many years where there were no churches and no ministers of the gospel.

When he arrived at the clergyman's house he was met at the door by the "Reverend Cass" himself, and was so simply greeted that he suddenly changed his mind about "sky pilots."

"Hello, pard!" said the clergyman, extending a big brown hand. "Walk!"

At the same time he drew the reluctant Tad into the house.

It was a pretty house, in which the deft hand of a woman of refinement and good taste was everywhere apparent.

Tad sat down in a large chintz-covered chair, and the "Reverend Cass" took his hat and laid it on a table covered with books.

Tad didn't know there were so many books in the world, although there could not have been more than a dozen on the table. His education had been obtained by rubbing against the world, and he had a wholesome respect for any one with an education gained in school or college.

"See here, Mr. Ferguson," began the clergyman-mayor, "I hear you are talking of kicking over the wagon tongue and refusing to accept the office to which you were elected."

"Well, I was reckonin' some that way," replied Tad slowly.

"You mustn't do it," said the "Reverend Cass." "There's laws here made for the benefit of the women and little children. Men like you and I don't need them, but the others do, and it's up to you and me to enforce them. That's why the people elected us. I've got the nerve to do my share, and the reason our people put you up and elected you is because we know that you are honest, and that if you swore to uphold the law it would be upheld."

"But I might have to kill some of my old pards enforcin' the law, an' I'd shore hate ter do that," protested Tad.

"That's why we elected you. A weaker man might have to kill. The boys know you, and there won't be any necessity for killing when you pin on your star."

There was a lot more talk between these two men, and when Tad Ferguson walked out of the clergyman's house he had promised to become the city marshal of Silver Plume.

He walked down the main street and dropped into every gambling-house.

Seeking out the proprietor he said:

"Sorry, but you've got to close up. No more gambling goes. Lock up them wheels and layouts, an' cards an' chips."

"What's the matter with you, Tad? Are you sick, or just crazy?"

"No, I'm just city marshal, an' there's a statoot on ther books o' ther city o' Silver Plume prohibitin' gamblin' in every form. I'm here to enforce ther law. You understand?"

The gambler looked into the steely gray eyes of the city marshal for a moment, then nodded his head.

"I understand," he said. "I'll close."

So it was all along the line. There were protestations long and loud from the rough element, but they all knew Tad's reputation, and the shortness of his temper when he was aroused or his will was crossed, and in an hour there was not a gambling-house in operation.

Bereft of their principal amusement when in town the cowboys set about inventing new forms of gambling not prohibited specifically in the statute-books, and at last succeeded in discovering one which afforded much hilarity and, at the same time, gave them an opportunity to dally with the fickle goddess, Chance.

The crowd now sitting in front of the Cow-punchers' Rest was getting ready for the evening's amusement when our story opens, and which has made this digression necessary.

The cowboy addressed as Frisk, who had "reckoned that he had the best frawg," resumed the conversation.

"What's the difference between a frawg an' a toad, Tub?" he asked. "They all look alike to me."

"A toad is a land animile," said Tub sagaciously, "while a frawg is a water-an'-land animile both, what ther college sharps calls amphibilus, er somethin' like ter that. Now, thar ain't enough loose water what ain't bein' used ter make coffee in this part of Wyoming ter support one frawg, let alone ther number of toads what infest this yere neighborhood."

"Well, I reckon perhaps yer right," said Frisk thoughtfully. "But I calls mine a frawg, an' that goes."

At the same time he drew from the pocket of his loose blue shirt a squat, warty toad, which sat in the palm of his hand blinking lazily with its bright, gemlike eyes.

"He shore is a right smart toad," assented Tub. "But I cal'late some that I have a large he toad what kin work faster than any toad what ever lepped a garden path, an' I stand ready ter back him fer money, marbles, er chalk."

"That's ther way ter talk," said Frisk briskly. "Go trot yer frawg outer ther stable, an' as soon as ther lamp is lighted we'll see who's right about this matter. Any other gent got a frawg what he sets a heap of store on?

If so my frawg, Cassabianca, is ready ter meet all comers."

"I ain't got one," said a young fellow in sheepskin chaps, rising from his chair, "but I reckon I kin rustle one."

"The more the merrier," said Frisk, with a happy laugh. "The rest of you gents hurry away an' dig up a frawg, an' we'll hev ther greatest turnyment ever seen in Silver Plume. We can't let ther town stagnate entire. I've rode twenty mile ter spend ther evenin' here, an' I want some fun fer my run."

Sitting in front of the hotel in chairs tipped against the wall was Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, and several of his companions in arms, members of the young rough riders' organization.

Ted had been listening to the conversation of the two cowboys with much amusement. But he was puzzled to know what the nature of the coming contest might be.

Presently Tub emerged from the hotel, carrying in his hand a fat, sleepy toad.

"Yere's ther all-firedest, slickest toad in ther business," he shouted jubilantly. "Ain't you ther swiftest toad in ther business, Baby?" he said, in a caressing voice.

"Well, listen ter ther galoot," laughed Frisk. "Oos baby is oo?"

"That's all right," growled Tub. "I'll bet yer my pinto against yer bay an' twenty-five dinaro that she'll make a better record by five minutes than yer ole truck-horse, with an outsider fer a referee an' two timekeepers."

"It's a bet," said Frisk animatedly.

Ted Strong was wondering if it was to be a jumping contest. He had heard of frogs being in jumping contests, but he did not know that toads were so gifted.

Meantime, Frisk had placed his toad, or "frawg," as he insisted upon calling it, upon the sidewalk, and was urging it to make little leaps by tickling its back with a straw.

"He's kind of sleepy to-night, is Cassabianca," he said. "I got ter give him a leetle exercise over ther jumps."

A little distance away Tub was exercising his Baby.

Other cowboys came lounging up; some of them had succeeded in capturing toads, but more of them had not. Altogether there were now about eight toads on the sidewalk, hopping this way and that in obedience to the promptings of their respective owners.

It was almost dark now, and a boy came out of the hotel with a step-ladder and proceeded to light the big lamp that hung over the entrance. The lamp was no sooner lighted than bugs and flies that live at night began to swarm about it, circling frantically. There were myriads of them, and where they came from was a mystery.

"We'll wait until they get good and thick before the gong strikes," said Frisk. "We don't want any let-up until the finish. Every contestant must have two timekeepers, one chosen by the owner an' the other by the referee."

"That suits me to a t-y-t," said Tub. "We'll draw straws for the first entry."

A few slips of paper were prepared by one of the non-contestants, and in the draw Tub was compelled to make the first entry.

Ted Strong could not guess what it was to be, and he would not ask.

The bugs and flies were in such myriads about the lamp now that they began to fall to the sidewalk, which they covered in great profusion. No one molested them, and around them was an excited group of citizens and cow-punchers.

"Bet a hundred to seventy-five that my frawg goes twice as far as yours," said Frisk.

"I've got you," said Tub promptly.

"Is this bet real money or just conversation?" asked a quiet voice.

They turned to see the city marshal, whose star glistened in the lamplight.

Frisk winked at Tub. "Jest conversation, Mr. Marshal," he said.

"All right, then," said Tad Ferguson, walking away.

"Will you act as referee?" said Frisk, walking up to Ted Strong, after throwing a glance over the assemblage.

"I don't know what it's all about, but I'm willing to accommodate in any way I can," said Ted, rising.

Tub dropped his toad into the midst of the bugs on the sidewalk, and an amazing thing took place.

Its little sticky tongue shot out and in with astonishing rapidity, and every time it did so a bug went down Baby's throat. Soon it had cleared the space about it, when it gave a hop and got busy once more. This was repeated several times, then the toad began to languish. It was swollen to twice its original size.

"Go on, Babe!" encouraged Tub. "Don't quit now!"

But Baby was full to repletion. She could eat no more.

"Five minutes," announced the timekeepers.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER VICTIM.

One by one the toads entered in the bug-eating contest were placed in the ring. Some of them lasted four minutes, and one or two beat Baby's record, and still the supply of insects did not seem to diminish, for as soon as a hundred or more of them had disappeared down the red throats of the voracious batrachians others swarmed in to take their places, to fall to the sidewalk when they struck the fatal lure, the lamp.

Now it was the turn of Cassabianca, who had watched his gorging fellows until he had developed an enormous appetite.

Frisk laid him gently on the edge of the sidewalk farthest from the swarming mass of insects.

Time was called, and the toad was released.

It took two hops to bring him to the edge of the circle of insects. Then he began to eat his way through them.

Three minutes had already been consumed, and Cassabianca's appetite had hardly been whetted.

"Say, pard," shouted Tub indignantly, "that's not fair. You didn't put your toad into the middle of the bunch like what we all did. That's what I call jockeyin'."

"I don't care what you call it, Tub," drawled Frisk. "He's my frawg, an' I'm takin' care of him. Besides, I didn't want to tread on no bugs, because I'm a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Insects. As for jockeyin', of course I jockeyed, jest like what you would 'a' done if you'd knowed how. I didn't travel with a trottin'-hoss when I was a kid fer nothin'."

The laugh was on Tub, and he got it from all sides.

The minutes dragged on, and Cassabianca continued to feed. He was no laggard, and his red tongue brought down the bugs with rapidity and precision.

He was the admiration of all beholders.

"Say, Frisk, what'll you take fer that thar reptile?" asked one of the cow-punchers.

"What do you want with a frawg?" asked the proud owner of the champion toad. "You couldn't do nothin' with him. It takes a man of experience an' great firmness ter make that frawg work right."

"I'll take him over ter Rawlins an' interdooce ther game," was the reply. "I know a hotel over thar whar thar's electric lights, an' more bugs to ther minnit than thar is here in a week. The sports over thar are crazy fer a new game, an' I want to get back some what they got away from me, makin' their trained flies light on the lump of sugar I didn't bet on. You tell me how ter make that frawg of yours act right an' I'll give you twenty-five simoleons."

"I'll will you that frawg, but I won't take your money," said Frisk. "Ther way ter beat a good frawg like that of Tub's is to get to Tub's first, an' give him a good big feed of flies before he enters ther ring, like what I did."

"Well, ding my aunt's cats!" shouted Tub. "I always knowed you was a smart kid, Frisk, but you certainly overreached this time. I ain't a-going ter pay that bet nohow."

"Rest easy, Tub," laughed Frisk. "I wa'n't goin' ter try ter collect it, fer I knows yer ain't got no money, an' I wouldn't own a pinto hoss if yer was ter give him ter me. They ain't no account."

Tub subsided into the background before the storm of laughter that signaled his defeat.

There was a great clatter of pony hoof-beats at the far end of the street.

"If I didn't know that Ponk Truman was about thirty mile away, ridin' herd, I'd figure out a guess that it was him come breezin' in now," said Frisk. "I don't know no more dern fool on a hoss that what that puncher is."

"If it ain't yerself," said Tub vindictively.

"It shore wouldn't be you, Tubby, my boy," retorted Frisk. "You can shore ride better in a spring buggy than what yer can on ther hurricane-deck of a bronk.

The argument was interrupted by the arrival of a human and equine tornado. The equine part of it came to a sudden halt and slid along in the dust on its haunches for several feet before it stopped. The human part of it was covered with dust, which the sweat had caked on his face so that a casual observer would not have been able to testify whether he was a Caucasian or an Ethiopian.

"Wow! Woop-ee! Yi-yip-yip-yip!"

"What's eatin' you, Ponk?" asked Frisk. "You seem some excited.

"Yep; ole Belle an' me come through on lightnin'-express time. We beat ther wind in, an' it's blowin' some out in the sand-hills," replied the cowboy. "Say, I'm dry as a handful of dust. I want a drink. Some of you punchers bring two buckets of water—one fer Belle an' one fer me."

"What brings yer in sech a sweat?"

"I come ter see you, dear. I been longin' fer a sight of yer sweet face so's I couldn't stand it no longer, an' jest had to come a-wingin' to yer. I'm satisfied now, an' I'm goin' back ther way I come. One look was plenty."

"Quit yer joshin'. Somethin' out of the ordinary brought yer here in that sweat."

"Yer right, pard. The Killer has got another of us."

"Sho! Yer don't say! Who is it this time?"

"Bill Hicks."

"Well, I swan. An' Bill was aimin' ter git married next month. This'll be sad news ter ther little gal."

"It will so. Yer see, Bill wanted ter go ter housekeepin' in style, an' he needed the money."

"It wa'n't no accident, then?"

"No. Bill was after ther reward."

"How did it happen?"

"He got a tip on whar ther Killer was rangin' over in ther direction of ther Bad Lands."

"An' he had ther nerve ter go after him alone."

"You bet he did. Before he left ther bunk-house he called me aside, an' says he: 'Ponk,' says he, 'I'm goin' after ther Killer,' says he. 'I want ter go alone, fer if I git him I want all ther reward. Don't say nothin' ter Maisie, an' don't tip it off ter ther boys, fer if yer do some crazy galoot will want ter jine ther experdition. If I don't come back soon come out an' look fer me.' Then he says *adios*, an' gallops off."

"I reckon you was some uneasy."

"You bet. I waited three days in a sweat, fer you all know what ther Killer is, an' ther record what he has made. Bill makes the thirteenth."

"Did he know he was ther thirteenth what had gone out after ther Killer?"

"Yep. I asked him ter let some other feller take ther responsibility attached ter ther number. But he only laughed, an' said that he wasn't afraid of no number, an' that if it wasn't him now, he'd never get a crack at ther reward, fer no one else was game ter tackle ther Killer and thirteen at ther same time."

"Bill was a game ole sport."

"Ther gamest what ever throwed a leg over leather."

"Pore Bill! What can we all do?"

"We're goin' ter bury him on ther ranch ter-morrer, an' we want all you fellers ter come over. It'll help comfort ther little gal, who is takin' on something awful."

"You bet we'll be there."

"An' I come in ter see if the sky pilot will come over an' help put pore Bill away right an' proper."

"I'll guarantee it."

Ted was an interested listener to the conversation among these cow-punchers, who a moment ago had been a reckless and laughing lot, careless of their own lives, but always deeply sorrowful when a brother threw his life away or lost it in the line of duty.

The assemblage was as silent as if they were in church.

The Reverend Cassius Volney, who was passing, stopped in amazement at the unwonted quiet of this crowd of cow-punchers, and approached it silently.

"Here's ther preacher," said one of the boys.

"What's the matter, men?" asked the "Reverend Cass," making his way through the group.

Ponk, the cowboy who brought the news, answered:

"One of the boys went after ther Killer, an' ther Killer got him. We're goin' ter bury him to-morrer at the Hay Crick Ranch, an' we was thinkin' that p'r'aps you'd come over an' give him a good send-off. It's a good thirty mile from here, an' a hard ride, but ther boys is willin' ter chip in liberal——"

"Never mind that," said the clergyman. "I'll go, sure, ride or no ride, and if you fellows say anything more

about paying me for it I'll get angry. Don't you know that I punched cattle myself and that I am still one of you."

"I didn't know, pard," said Ponk apologetically. "Then it's all right. Yer see, thar's a little gal over thar what Bill was ter marry soon, an' she's all broke up, an' needs ter see a good man. None of us punchers is much on ther comfort, although any one of us would fight fer her to a finish if she said the word."

"I'll be there. I know where the Hay Creek Ranch is very well. When is the funeral to take place?"

"Any time you say, parson."

"No, that is for the family and friends to say. You name the hour, and I will be there."

"That's right good of ye, parson. We all was thinkin' two o'clock would be about right. It will give ther boys time ter ride in from all over ther range. They all want to be there, fer Bill was a white man if ever there was one, an' he leaves many an achin' heart behind."

"I'll be there at two, or before."

"Thank ye, parson." This came from many a throat as the Reverend Cassius Volney made his way back through the crowd.

"Adios, hombres," said Ponk. "I'll see yer to-morrer. I got ter hustle back an' git things ready. Who'll stake me ter a fresh hoss? Somebody can ride Belle in ther mornin'; she'll be as fresh as a daisy then."

A half-dozen ponies were pressed upon him, and he chose the first that came, and was off again like a tornado.

The cow-punchers dispersed their various ways, leaving only the young rough riders and an old gray-whiskered cattleman sitting in front of the hotel.

For some minutes nothing was said. All were deeply thinking of the scene they had just witnessed.

The old cattleman was watching Ted's face, which was very expressive of his feelings when he was moved.

"That's the way the young fellows go," mused the old man. "They'll take any sort of a chance to get what they want. I've taken them myself, and I know what I'm talkin' about. But that boy Bill Hicks, what I've knowed ever since he come onto this range, oughter knowed better than to go up against the Killer just when he was goin' ter marry ther prettiest little gal in this part of ther country, an' one who jest worshiped ther ground his pony galloped over."

"Why don't the State officers get after this man you call the Killer and send a body of men out for him?" asked Ted.

The old man chuckled.

"It ain't a man, my boy," he said.

"Not a man. Then what is it?"

"It's a hoss!"

CHAPTER III.

A DANGEROUS MAN

Ted looked at the old cattleman in amazement.

"A horse!" he exclaimed. "Great Scott, and it has killed thirteen men!"

The old cattleman grunted: "Yep, Bill makes the thirteenth."

"Why don't they shoot it? Surely a horse, no matter how unruly it is, can be no worse to attack than a grizzly bear," said Ted.

"Well, it's this way," replied the old man with a slow smile; "that hoss is more prized by its owner than anythin' on this yearth. It was raised by her husband, who is dead, an' endurin' his lifetime it was ther best hoss in this er any other country."

"Then it is a mere matter of sentiment that permits this horse to go on murdering good men?"

"Somethin' like that, yet not altogether. Ye see, the lady what owns that hoss has asked the boys not to kill it, but to capture it and subdue it, and then bring it in to her. And she makes it worth while to do so."

"She has offered a reward for it?"

"Precisely."

"It must be a pretty big one for so many men to risk their lives for."

"Pretty fair."

"How much, may I ask?"

"Five thousand."

"Whew! That makes a pretty expensive range-horse."

"As I said, it is a matter of sentiment with the lady, who is so rich, anyway, that five thousand is jest pin-money."

"And I suppose the boys on the range care more for the chance of getting that five thousand than they do about seeing their comrades killed by it, or being killed themselves."

"You don't do the boys justice. You saw how they felt when Ponk Truman came in an' told of Bill's death. That don't look much like it. Say, you ever see Mrs. Crittenden?"

"Not that I know. Who is she?"

"She is the lady who owns the Killer."

"Well, if I had a horse that had killed thirteen men, I'd be glad if some one would kill it."

"I don't think Mrs. Crittenden would object seriously if it was killed, but the boys won't have it that way. So Mrs. Crittenden, seeing how they felt about it, offered the reward in the hope that it would spur the boys on to capture the hoss, and stop the killing of any more men."

"What's the matter with the beast?"

"I don't know as anybody really knows just what is the matter with it, except that it is plumb crazy."

"Locoed?"

"Well, something like that, but not exactly, either. There's something strange about it. It's a sort of a mystery."

"Is it violent always?"

"No. That's the strange thing about it. At times it is perfectly gentle, and mingles with the other horses on the range."

"Why don't the boys get it then?"

"It will not permit them to approach. When it sees them coming it escapes like the wind. When Captain Crittenden was alive the horse was as gentle as a kitten and would follow him everywhere at the sound of his voice or the snap of his finger."

"Then it is the fault of the boys themselves if they go after it and get killed?"

"That's about it. They all admire Mrs. Crittenden very much, and they want to do what they can for her with the hoss. The boys know what they are going up against when they tackle that hoss. No one asks them to do it, and thar ain't no one as shall say that they sha'n't take

the risk if they are that foolish. But if a boy of mine tried it, I'd give him the ding-awfullest lickin' he ever got."

"You said there was something mysterious about the actions of the horse at times. What do you mean by that?"

"Lad, if I knew it wouldn't be mysterious, would it?"

"I can't say that it would," said Ted, laughing. "But I thought you might have some reason for saying that."

"I shore have a reason for makin' any statement, same as any other sensible man. It ain't altogether reasonable that a good, kind, wise hoss like this outlaw was before this devilment got into him went wrong of his own account. I've been handlin' hosses all my life, that's my business, an' I never see a hoss go crazy yet, unless there was somethin' behind it."

"That's my experience," said Ted.

The old man looked at Ted strangely, as if to ask what a boy should know about horses, but he made no comment, and went on:

"It ain't natural for hosses to go crazy like folks. It's only when they have been abused or are attacked by some sort of disease that they go crazy, and this hoss we've been discussin' was never sick either before or after the captain died. Therefore, I say there's somethin' mysterious about it, an' believe that if that hoss is ever captured, which I doubt, the mystery will be solved."

"I like mysteries. I believe I'll go after that Killer myself."

Ted said this in such a plain, matter-of-fact way, as if it were a very ordinary undertaking, that the old man turned around and stared at him.

"Don't ye do it, son," he said earnestly. "You're too young to undertake anything of that sort, an', besides, it takes experience an' years to do stunts like that."

"I've had experience enough" said Ted quietly.

"Bein' a soldier-boy isn't all the experience there is in the world, son. Take my advice an' let that hoss be."

"I'll risk it."

"What might yer name be? I ain't none inquisitive, but I kinder like yer style, an' I hate ter see yer be number fourteen."

"My name is Ted Strong."

"Moses! I thought Ted Strong was a growed man. Are you the same Ted Strong what is a deputy United States marshal?"

"The same," said Ted, laughing at the old man's perplexed look.

"I reckon you'll get that hoss," said the old man. "But I jest nacherly hate ter see yer take ther risk."

"Never mind about me," said Ted. "I've been up against such stunts before. I'm going to turn in now, as I am going to begin the campaign against the Killer to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night, son. Good luck to ye."

They shook hands and parted.

The other boys had long since turned in, when they saw that Ted was so deeply interested in his conversation with the old man; and it was not long before Ted was asleep also.

Before daylight the next morning a strange cavalcade rode into the town. It consisted of a beautiful woman riding a superb coal-black horse, followed by six typical cowboys, all heavily armed.

The woman rode directly to the Cow-punchers' Rest, and leaped from her saddle to the sidewalk.

A man emerged from the gloom of the doorway, and approached her, and instantly two cowboys were by her side.

"It's all right, boys," she said in a low voice. "It's only Colonel Henderson. I was to meet him here."

At this the cowboys stepped back to their horses, and the lady and the old cattleman, who had talked to Ted the night before, retired to the doorway and entered into an earnest conversation in low voices.

"Ted Strong here!" the cowboy attendants heard her exclaim in tones of surprise and delight. Then they heard no more for awhile. But as the lady was about to step into the hotel, they heard the old man say: "All right, ma'am, I'll have the young fellow around in two or three hours. Better lie down for a couple of hours, Mrs. Crittenden, ma'am, an' get some rest."

The cowboys at this took their horses around to the corral, and, lying down on some bales of hay, were soon sleeping soundly, for they had been riding all night.

Colonel Henderson, as Mrs. Crittenden had called the old gentleman, sat dozing in the hotel lobby, his head nodding on his breast, and then woke with a start.

Evidently he was waiting for some one.

But when the porters began to sweep out the place, he got up and paced the sidewalk.

Presently Kit Summers came out of the hotel.

"Are you a member of Ted Strong's party?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, sir," answered Kit.

"Well, would you please tell him that a friend of his would like to speak to him as soon as convenient."

"I'd like to, but Ted went out for a ride about an hour ago, leaving word in a note that he would be back in time for breakfast."

"All right, sir, thank ye," said the colonel, and dodged into the hotel.

"Wonder what's up?" muttered Kit. "I'll keep my eye on that old codger."

But all he saw was the old gentleman writing a note which he gave to the clerk, who, in turn, handed it to a porter, who disappeared up the stairs with it.

In the course of a few minutes a beautiful woman in a black riding-habit came down the stairs, and joined the colonel.

"The plot thickens," said Kit to himself.

At the far end of the street he saw Ted approaching at an easy gallop on Sultan, his splendid black stallion.

Colonel Henderson was standing in the doorway. When he saw Ted coming, he beckoned to some one inside, and the beautiful woman came out and never let her eyes wander from Ted as he rode up to the hotel and, throwing his reins over Sultan's head, dropped to the ground.

"Good morning," he said to his companion of the night before, raising his hat in deference to the lady.

"Good morning," said the colonel. "Will you step here a moment. Mrs. Crittenden, allow me to present my young friend, Mr. Ted Strong, whom you desired me to find and introduce to you."

"I am very glad to meet Mr. Strong," said Mrs. Crittenden, in a low, sweet voice. "I have heard so much about your exploits in all parts of the West that naturally I have had a desire to meet you and talk with you. Also I have a commission for you to undertake, if you care to help a woman in danger."

"I shall be only too proud to do anything I can for you, Mrs. Crittenden," said Ted.

"There may be great danger in it for you," said the lady, in an anxious tone of voice.

"That makes little difference," responded Ted. "I am used to danger. It lends variety to life."

"But do you not know what the commission is yet," she said, smiling at Ted's ready willingness to become her champion.

"Of course, it will be necessary for me to know that before I can act."

"Then come to the parlor after you have breakfasted, for you must be very hungry after your ride."

"I could relish my breakfast," said Ted, with a laugh, "but I am at your service now if you need me."

"No; an hour or two later will be time enough," she answered, smiling upon him kindly, and offering her hand, which he shook.

"What's up?" asked Kit, when Ted came up to him.

"I'm blessed if I know," answered Ted. "She has something for us to do, but she will tell me what it is after we have had breakfast. Where are the other fellows?"

"Down at the corral looking after the horses. But see here, Ted, I've something to say to you before you go. Do you see that tall, dark fellow with the long black mustache standing in that doorway?"

"He's perfectly apparent."

"When you were talking to the lady he came round the corner, and when he saw you he stopped as if he had been shot, and made a motion toward his hip pocket. But he seemed to think better of it, for he did not draw a weapon. But the look on his face was the most diabolical I ever saw on that of a human being. Perhaps he is the reason for the commission she has for us."

"I think not; I believe that it has to do with the suppression of that crazy horse."

"Perhaps you are right. Let us go to breakfast."

While Ted was at breakfast he received a note from Mrs. Crittenden asking him to meet her in the parlor at ten o'clock. This left him several hours in which to attend to personal business in the town.

As he walked up the street he observed that he was being followed by the dark man whom Kit had detected. On every possible occasion this fellow placed himself in Ted's way, until it became more than annoying. Ted saw that he was trying to pick a fight, which he wished to avoid if possible.

But as Ted was coming out of the post-office the fellow deliberately stepped on his foot.

The insult was so evident that Ted simply drew back his left arm, and his fist shot forth.

It caught his annoyer fairly between the eyes, and he shot backward across the sidewalk, and landed in the gutter on his neck, where he lay quivering.

"Great guns!" exclaimed a man at his elbow. "Do you know who that is?"

"No," answered Ted. "But I know that he has an awfully hard head."

"That is Philip Ramsey, the gambler, and the most dangerous man in all Wyoming."

"He doesn't look very dangerous now," said Ted quietly, as he walked away.

CHAPTER IV.

TED ON THE TRAIL.

When Ted reached the hotel the clerk told him that Mrs. Crittenden was waiting for him in the parlor, whither he immediately went.

"You are exactly on time," she said pleasantly.

"It is a habit," answered Ted.

"And a very good one for all boys to learn," she answered, with a smile. "I suppose you wonder why I sent for you."

"I wasn't expecting a commission of any sort here, for a fact. I came over from my ranch in the Black Hills to buy some horses to fill an order I have for the North Woods. I arrived only yesterday afternoon, and expected to stay here a few days, but circumstances alter cases. I am in no hurry, and will remain as long as I can be of service to you."

"I thank you very much for your chivalrous acceptance of my request for help without knowing anything about me, or what I am going to ask you to do for me."

"That is merely a part of the creed of the young rough riders, and of all fellows who make any pretensions of being manly," said Ted simply. "But tell me what I and my comrades can do for you."

Before answering, Mrs. Crittenden took from a pocket in her purse a piece of paper, which she handed to Ted.

"Read that," she said.

Ted unfolded the paper, and studied it, the look on his face growing more puzzled the longer he examined it.

This was what he saw:

"For the last time. The black hawk will be at the sign of the old trail on the fifteenth of this moon, at the big wigwam of the red stone in the great council-chamber when the sun is half-way up the eastern sky. If the Prairie Rose is not there at that time, she will wither before the frost comes."

For signature there was a rude drawing of a bird with wide-spread wings and a curved sharp beak, done in solid black.

Mrs. Crittenden watched Ted's face as he pondered over this remarkable document.

"A threat from an Indian," he said, half to himself. "Yet it is in passably good English, and such as no Indian, except one of the renegades from an Indian school, would write."

"It is not from an Indian," said Mrs. Crittenden quietly.

"No? But the signature is Black Hawk."

"Yes. But read this. I found it under the door of my room this morning when I returned from the dining-room."

She handed Ted another note which she had been holding in her hand.

"You were not at the big wigwam of the red stone on the fifteenth of this moon as Black Hawk commanded. Black Hawk always does what he says. Black Hawk never lies. His beak and talons will be felt soon. There is no escape."

The same signature, the picture of a black hawk, was appended to this communication.

"I give it up," said Ted. "Of course, if I knew any of the attendant circumstances, I should probably be able to

study out an interpretation of it. I have an idea what it reads, but I don't know what is behind it."

"Let me hear your interpretation of it," said Mrs. Crittenden.

"Very well, I'll try. Evidently this is the last warning or threat."

"It is a threat."

"So I suspected. The black hawk is the enemy of the person to whom the letters are addressed. I should suppose it to be a white man, whose appearance and character are somewhat related to one of the most cruel birds in the West, the black hawk."

"You are perfectly right. The man who wrote that note is both cruel and wicked," said Mrs. Crittenden, with flashing eyes, as if her memories had made her suddenly angry.

"The sign of the old trail," read Ted slowly. "Let me see. The old trail in this part of the country is the cattle trail to Cheyenne."

"Correct again."

"The sign of the trail, therefore, is Cheyenne. That is easy."

Mrs. Crittenden nodded.

"The big wigwam of the red stone I should interpret as a big stone building, and probably a hotel. The great council-chamber will be the parlor, I have no doubt. The sun is half-way up the eastern sky at this time of the year at about ten o'clock."

"You have read it correctly."

"The Prairie Rose is a lady, no doubt. Yourself, I take it."

Mrs. Crittenden blushed as she nodded, until she looked like a prairie flower.

"Of course, this phrase about withering before frost comes means a threat of death."

Mrs. Crittenden shuddered as Ted said this, and he hastened to continue.

"This moon is August, and the fifteenth day of it was the day before yesterday, and still nothing has happened. Did the Prairie Rose go to Cheyenne?"

Mrs. Crittenden shook her head.

"Where were you then?"

"At my ranch, about thirty miles from here."

"Why did you come here?"

"I was afraid of Black Hawk, and thought I would be safer where there were plenty of men."

"And what made you seek my assistance?"

"I didn't—exactly. It was like this: I sent a messenger to Colonel Henderson, who was my husband's closest friend in this country, telling him of the threats against me, and asking him to find for me some person thoroughly capable of protecting me, and putting a stop to a persecution that has become unbearable. He sent back word that he would do so; that he would take the matter into his own hands, but that he felt that he was too old to undertake such a strenuous task. Quite accidentally he met you last night, and when he learned your identity he knew that fortune had thrown the right person in his way. When I arrived this morning he told me that he had found just what I wanted. When he told me about you I was more than satisfied that if you would undertake the mission I would be safe, for I have often heard of the brave things you and your friends have done in the West."

Ted flushed at this compliment.

"Now," he said, "won't you tell me all about it from the beginning, and please don't mind if I interrupt to ask you a question now and then."

"Very well; but it will take me back to the time when I was a girl," said Mrs. Crittenden. Now, as she sat in her tailor-made riding-habit, which fitted her slender figure to perfection, she looked little more than a girl.

"My father was one of the pioneer cattlemen of Wyoming," she continued. "When I was ten years old my mother died, leaving dad and me all alone. He sent me back to Massachusetts to an aunt to be educated.

"When I was sixteen my father sent for me. When I reached the ranch I found father had employed a handsome, dark young fellow as manager. His name was Philip Ramsey."

Ted smiled.

"Do you know him?" asked Mrs. Crittenden hastily.

"I have not the pleasure."

"Back East I had never been allowed the companionship of young men, and when Mr. Ramsey, as I then called him, began showing me attentions I was naturally flattered. He lived at the ranch-house, and took his meals with dad and me. Consequently we were thrown into one another's society a great deal.

"He made violent love to me, and I was young and foolish enough to think that I loved him. He wanted me to run away with him to Cheyenne and get married, and when I refused to do so he frightened me with his terrible rages, threatening to kill me and then himself. But I defied him. He was very cruel to the horses under his charge, over which he had a most wonderful control, and to everything else that feared him. His thin, hooked nose and black hair led me to nickname him Black Hawk, of which he seemed to be very proud, and he called me Prairie Rose, much to my disgust.

"I was afraid to tell my father, for I knew that when he heard of the foreman's advances to me he would kill him on sight. So things went on for several months, when Captain Crittenden came.

"I will not dwell on this episode of my life further than to say that I eventually married him, and he bought the finest ranch in Wyoming, and while we were in Europe a splendid house was built on it for our occupancy.

"When we returned I found that Ramsey was still in the employ of my father. At first he hardly looked at me when we met, and I thought he had forgotten the past. So it continued until the death of my father, when my husband employed Ramsey as manager. I did not dare tell the captain anything about Ramsey, although I trembled every time he looked at me with his wicked, leering smile. But he said nothing to me save the most commonplace things. He did not live with us, but had a house of his own.

"My husband had been in ill health for some time, but was not alarmed about it. Finally one night he was taken violently sick, and before I could summon aid he died."

Mrs. Crittenden paused and held her handkerchief to her eyes for a few moments, and resumed:

"After my husband's death, his favorite horse, Rex, disappeared. I loved the horse dearly for its association with my husband, and I was frantic with grief at his loss. I sent out parties to search for it, and spent a great deal of money in an endeavor to find it.

"I had sent Ramsey away, and employed another man-

ager in his place. He went, but before he did so he said to me: 'I will be back here some day as master.'

"One day a party searching for Rex came in minus a man. He had been killed in an endeavor to capture the horse, and several of the other men were badly hurt. They reported that Rex was crazy.

"The horse was branded an outlaw on the range, and all the cowboys were after him to shoot him, but I sent out a notice to them begging them not to do so."

"Would it not have been more merciful to have had him shot?" asked Ted.

"Perhaps, but I could not bear to have him killed. At last the cow-punchers, who are all my friends, agreed among themselves not to shoot him. I have in every case provided for the families of the men whom Rex has killed. I am only waiting for some one to capture and cure him of his madness."

"I am going to try to do so," said Ted.

"Oh, I hope you will be successful. But first I want you to see if you cannot rid me of Ramsey in some way. I am now going to tell you something at which you may scoff. I am convinced that Ramsey killed my husband by poison, and I have suspicions that my father met the same fate."

Ted shrank back with a feeling of horror, and the expression on Mrs. Crittenden's face shadowed the same emotion.

After brooding a moment Mrs. Crittenden said:

"If I do not marry him I am sure that he will murder me, also."

"He will not," said Ted, with a snap of his jaws. "I will take care of him."

"But how?"

"Time will tell. I will keep an eye on him, and on you also."

"But he is such a terrible man. He has many murders scored against him."

"I am not afraid of him. He will not kill many more people. He is a rabbit."

"I am afraid I do not understand you."

"Pardon me. That is a bit of cowboy slang to indicate that he is not altogether too courageous, even if he has killed a good many men. It does not take an enormous amount of courage to shoot a man in the back or administer poison to him."

"Then you do know him?"

"I had the pleasure of knocking him into the gutter with my fist an hour ago."

CHAPTER V.

STELLA ARRIVES.

Having concluded his interview with Mrs. Crittenden, Ted went down to the hotel office, where he found the boys awaiting him.

Kit immediately beckoned him to one side.

"Say, Ted," exclaimed Kit excitedly, "what do you think? That chap you knocked down this morning at the post-office has been around here looking for you for an hour, threatening to shoot you on sight. He said you were hiding out from him."

"Why didn't you tell him where I was, or come up and tell me he was down here?" asked Ted. "What did he have to say?"

"He said you were a coward, and that you had taken advantage of him when he wasn't looking and struck him, and that the blow he received on the back of the head when he fell had knocked him insensible, and that you ran away afterward.

"He walked up and down the lobby making all sorts of cracks about you with a big gun in his hand, telling the awe-struck populace how he was going to eat you raw with a little dash of mustard, when he comes opposite Bud.

"You know how sassy Bud can look when he wants to. Well, the bad man looks up and sees the grin on Bud's mug. 'What are you grinning about, you mutt?' he says, waving his gun about in a circle.

"'I wuz jest thinkin' how funny you'd look if Ted Strong should happen in at this moment,' says Bud, as pert as you please. 'Then why don't you go and call him, or tell me where he is?' says the bad man.

"'I'd give a ten-dollar note if I knew where he was this minnit,' says Bud. 'I'm thinkin' he'd hand you a few more.'

"'None of your slack. Do you know who I am?' says the fellow. 'Oh, yes, I've taken the trouble to find out that much,' says Bud. 'You're a tin-horn gambler, and all-around crook and four-flusher. You've got these pore innercent people in this lonesome burg bluffed into thinkin' you're some gun-fighter. Slush!'

"Before any of us knew what had happened Bud jumped forward like a cat, had kicked the gun from the bad man's hand, and had hit him twice, as hard as he could; and Bud can hit like a kick of a Missouri mule's south hind foot.

"Several of the bad man's friends jumped forward to help him and give Bud the worst of it, but we all closed in, and when they saw our artillery they climbed out in a hurry."

"I was on the next floor, and didn't hear anything of it," said Ted.

"I suppose not, for I never saw anything quicker or more scientifically done. It was as quiet as a game of chess."

"Did they leave any word for me?"

"Nothing beyond that you would be killed on sight."

"Is that all? 'A threatened man lives long.'"

Ted sauntered over to Bud, who was leaning lazily against the desk, as if nothing had happened, puffing away on a brown-paper cigareet, as he called it.

"Say, Buddy, I wouldn't have your disposition for a gift," he said.

"What's ther matter with my disposition?" growled Bud.

"What are you thinking about, picking a quarrel with a nice, peaceable gentleman who is making a social call on me with a mountain howitzer? The folks around here, not knowing your sunny temperament, will sure think you're fussy."

Bud grinned.

"Thet thar hombre is plumb yaller, Ted," he said. "Be mighty keerful how yer turns yer back on him. His smoke-stick might go off accerdental an' puncture yer yertybray."

"So I hear. I wonder where he is now. I should like to see him," said Ted.

"Oh, I reckon he's got er spy-glass, and is lookin' fer yer whar he'd be most likely ter find yer, to wit, on ther moon, fer he's got ther gall ter think thet he's chased yer plumb off'n ther yearth."

Carl Schwartz came running into the office at that moment from the street.

Perspiration was running in muddy rivulets from his face, which shone white through a cake of dust, for he had been riding up from the corral leading several of the ponies to have them in readiness when Ted should issue marching-orders.

"*Ach, Himmel!*" he cried. "Over me look kvick, und see if I am shooted anyveres."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Ted, in a voice of feigned horror. "Were you struck by a cannon-ball? What is that stuff, Bud?"

He was patting a spot on Carl's back, and the German boy almost twisted his head off trying to see it.

"It looks to me like blood," said Kit.

"But that is blue," said Ted.

"Thet thar is ther correct color fer Carl's blood," said Bud. "He told me himself thet his family over in Dootchland makes a specialty o' raisin' ther bluest blood in ther whole country, an' that if he wanted ter he could be a Germany count er counter, er something like that."

Carl had peeled off his coat, and looked anxiously at the stain on the back of it.

"You're full mit foolishness," he said excitedly. "You're a doodle. Ain'd you know der diff—defferenciationess between plood as baint? Dot is der ploo baint vat I scraped mit der chuck-wagon off."

"Now I'm hep ter whar them cold beans went ther other night," said Bud.

Carl had a passion for cold beans, and Bud never lost an opportunity to joke him about it.

"You talk like a giggle," said Carl angrily. "I ain't nefer stole some peans. I got money to puy dose delicatessen peans ven my pean-basket call fer dem. Besides, dere vasn't no peans in der vagon. I looked."

The shout of laughter that went up at this told Carl that he was guilty of a slip of the tongue, and he grew furious.

"Oh, vas efer such a bunch oof doodles in der vide vorlt as I am—no, as you are?" he shouted.

After the boys had quieted down Ted turned to Carl.

"What was the matter when you came running in, Carl?" he asked. "You were pale, and said you had been shot."

"You all treat me so mean I guess I ain't tell you," said Carl doggedly.

"Oh, please, Carl! Nice Carl! Dear Carl! Won't you please tell us?" cried the boys, in unison.

"No, I haf my mind made up dot ven you tease poor little Carl like dot to make foolishness mit him he von't spooken about it until you all apologize mit him, und say how dat you didn't mean it, und you promise a fine dinner to buy fer him ven ve get back mit Deadwood again."

Bud made one jump for him, and Carl with a shriek of terror fled toward the door.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" shouted Bud.

"Don'd shoot, But! Don'd shoot! I'm running so fast I haven't der strength to stop," Carl shouted back.

They reached the sidewalk, and Bud fired a shot into the air just as the Cheyenne stage dashed up and stopped.

A succession of feminine shrieks came from the interior of the vehicle, when the door swung open with a bang, and a girl in the perfection of youthful beauty leaped to the ground.

"What's the row?" she called.

Then, as she saw the fat form of Carl fleeing up the street, and Bud, whose back was toward her, doubled up with laughter, peal after peal of laughter came from between her red lips.

The boys came running out of the hotel at the sound of the shot.

"Great Scott, it's Stella!" shouted Ted, leaping forward with both hands outstretched. "Where in the world did you come from?"

"Cheyenne," she answered. "Hello, boys! Glad to see you all again. What's the stunt?"

"Trouble galore," said Ted.

"Just got here in time, eh?" said Stella Fosdick, Ted's girl pard. "Mercy, but I'm a lucky girl!"

> "Cheyenne, Cheyenne, jump on my pony,
> There's room for you, dear, and for you only,"

sang out Ben's fine barytone, and the boys joined in the refrain of the cowboy song.

But poor Carl was not to be seen. He had disappeared over the edge of the horizon.

"Say, fellows, it's a shame to drive poor Carl away from home like that," said Stella. "One of you lend me a bronk, and I'll ride out and rope him and bring him in."

"I reckon I'll go with you," said Bud, "an' 'pologize ter ole Hock der Geezer fer makin' him run so hard."

"No, you won't," said Stella. "If he saw you coming he never would stop. I'll bring him back."

At a word the pony Kit had brought to Stella broke into a gallop, and was soon out of sight over a rise on the prairie.

Carl had run over the rise and stopped, knowing that Bud would not take the trouble to follow him that far. But when he heard the hoof-beats of the pony Stella was riding he thought sure that Bud was after him, and he began to run wildly.

As she topped the rise Stella saw him and could not keep from laughing.

"Carl, wait a minute," she called. "It's Stella."

Carl recognized her voice and looked over his shoulder to make sure he was not being fooled, then stopped and stood panting until Stella reached him.

"Hello, Stella! Py chee! but I vas glad to see you vonce more yet," said Carl. "Vere you come out of dis time? Ven I hear your voice I dink sure it vor dot But," cried Carl, shaking hands with her.

"I must say that's complimentary," laughed Stella, "to compare my voice with Bud's."

"No, dot I don'd mean," expostulated Carl. "But, he have a voice like as a sawmill saw r-r-ripping t'roo a hard-pine knot. Vile you—*ach, Himmel!* I cannot expressionate myselluf. It vas as dose anchels mit vings singing mit der clouds in. It vas so sveet it tickles my ear to hear it."

"Fine!" said Stella, in a gale of laughter. "You're getting on fast, Carl."

"Don'd you go und dell dot But Morkan vot I haf sait," pleaded Carl.

"Certainly not, Carl," said Stella gently. "That was for me alone, and I shall tell no one what you said, and I think it was very nice of you to think of it."

They were soon back at the hotel, where the boys were waiting for them.

"Now, see here, But, you sdop dis foolishment mit me, or you'll haf a duel mit me to fight, like ve do in Chermany," said Carl excitedly.

"All right, Carl; I'm sorry I chased yer out, but yer

made me plumb mad when yer wouldn't tell us why yer come runnin' in yere, sayin' yer was shot," said Bud.

"Dot's all right, But," said Carl generously. "But you scared me so I couldn't tell notings. *Ach*, now I remembrance. Der chent mit der black eye und der big gun vot vas in here for Ted looking, rode out der town mit a bunch oof cow-punchers as I vas leading der ponies up from der corral. Ven dey saw me dey took a shot mit me, und I dinks I got shooted in der back mit a bullet."

"Great Scott!" cried Ted. "Why didn't you tell us about this before? Which way did they go?"

"Out mit der west."

"Then that's the way we go. Get ready to be off."

"Where's my pony, Ted?" asked Stella.

"You are not going, are you, Stella?" asked Ted anxiously.

"You bet. What do you think I came out here for, but to join you all in anything that happened to be doing?"

"All right; come along to the corral, and we'll see what we can do about a pony for you."

The man at the corral stared when he saw this pretty young girl in a short tan skirt, red bolero jacket, and high tan boots, and with a wide white sombrero crowning her flying hair, approach him with a confident air.

"I want the best pony you have in the corral," she said briskly.

"Yessum," said the man. "But we have no side-saddles."

"Who said anything about a side-saddle? Give me a good easy-riding cowboy saddle, and hustle, for I haven't much time to spare."

The man stood staring at her in stupid admiration for a moment, then gathered up a rope and entered the corral, in which the ponies were milling around and around, for they knew that there was work for at least one of them.

Stella climbed upon the fence and ran her eye over the herd as the man stood in the middle of the corral swinging the rope over his head.

"Rope that chestnut coming toward you," shouted Stella.

"That's the very one I was going to get for you," answered the man, as the rope left his hand in a series of spirals and settled over the pony's head.

It bucked and kicked for a few moments, then gave up the fight.

The saddle was on it in a trice, and Stella, disdaining assistance, put her foot in the stirrup and sprang into the saddle.

The pony walked out of the yard on its hind legs.

"Gee! that's ther first time I ever see a gal ride straddle like a man, and she can ride some, too," said the corral-keeper.

CHAPTER VI.

PONK TRUMAN JOINS THE FORCE.

"Into your saddles; we're off, boys!" cried Ted briskly.

As he led the way out of town Stella and Bud galloped to either side of him.

"What's it all about, and where are we going?" asked Stella.

As briefly as possible Ted told Mrs. Crittenden's story, and that of the outlaw horse, Rex, nicknamed the Killer.

"It is my belief that Phil Ramsey, alias Black Hawk, is making for the Double Heart Ranch, which belongs to Mrs. Crittenden, so called from the brand."

"That's a curious brand," said Stella.

"It is, and it has a curious history. When Captain Crittenden first came to this country his brand was a heart. When he married he added another heart for his wife, and the ranch became known as the Double Heart, although few people knew its significance."

"From what you say Mrs. Crittenden is still at the hotel, and this chap Ramsey knows it, for he slipped a note under her bedroom door this morning. Then why should he be traveling toward her ranch looking for revenge when she is elsewhere?"

"I'll tell yer what I think," interrupted Bud. "While this sweet-scented flower, Ramsey, wuz cavortin' around in ther hotel lobby I see him called ter one side by a bell-boy, who whispered ter him fer a minute er so, an' Ramsey handed him a tip. After that ther tin horn blew."

"Ah, then I suppose he had the bell-boy acting as a spy upon me. Probably he heard a great deal of the conversation I had with Mrs. Crittenden, and Ramsey knows that I am going to try and get the outlaw horse."

"I believe you are right. What do you think he will do?" said Stella.

"I reckon he knows thet you air erbout ther best hossman in ther West, an' thet if yer go after that thar outlaw yer stand a mighty good show o' gittin' him," said Bud. "Tharfore, what is his game? Why, he'll chase ther outlaw away so's yer cain't find it."

"Perhaps you are right. I know that just at present the outlaw is ranging somewhere between the Double Heart and the Hay Creek ranches, but I do not know the exact spot."

"That feller what come inter Silver Plume with ther news o' Bill Hicks' death seems ter know whar ther Killer is," suggested Bud.

"I was just thinking of that," said Ted. "He will be at Hay Creek Ranch to-night after the funeral. We ought to be able to reach there by sundown, if we ride. We'll get him to guide us. By the way, what is his name?"

"Ponk Truman, I heard one o' ther punchers call him."

"That's right. There was another likely-looking fellow in that lot. They called him Frisk. I believe we'd better ride to the Hay Creek Ranch and pick those boys up. What do you say?"

"That's ther c'rect diagnosis."

"A wagon-trail runs to the Hay Creek, and branches off out here somewhere to the Double Heart. Let us do a bit of scouting and find it, instead of running wild all over the prairie. We may lose a little time now, but we'll make it up later."

Ted and Stella dashed off to the right and Bud to the left. The rest of the party were some distance behind, jogging along comfortably, and when they saw this maneuver they understood that it was a trail-hunting expedition, and brought their ponies down to a walk.

Presently they heard a revolver-shot away to the right, although Ted and Stella were out of sight behind the swells of the prairie, as was Bud also.

Ben fired his revolver, and soon they saw Bud come galloping back.

Then they all sprang away in the wake of Ted.

He had found a wide trail, evidently that which led to the two ranches.

"We've got to do some riding if we are to get to Hay Creek for supper," said Ted, and he led away at a stiff gallop with Stella by his side, and the boys fell into pairs.

In an hour or so they came to a split in the trail, and took to the right.

"What about your aunt, Stella?" asked Ted, as they rode along.

"She followed me on the next train," said Stella. "I got tired of waiting for her to get ready, and came on. It's a lucky thing I did, or I would have missed you altogether. As it is, I got to Silver Plume just in the nick of time."

"She is going to follow you?"

"Yes; I left a note at the hotel for her to wait until I sent her word where to come. I didn't know where you were going; neither did you, I suppose."

"We can send a puncher in from the Hay Creek Ranch with a note to her to-night, for I suppose she will be in on to-morrow's stage, telling her to hire a rig and drive out to Hay Creek."

"That's the very thing. Ted, you have a great way of picking the right solution the first time."

They galloped along in silence for a time, occasionally pulling their ponies down to a walk to give them a rest.

"What's that speck off to the north?" asked Stella. "A tiny white thing. Can't you see it?"

"Yes. I saw it half an hour ago," said Ted. "It's the Hay Creek Ranch-house."

"You mean thing! Why didn't you let me think that I was the first to discover it?"

"That's so, I should have done that. But I am a blunderer. However, I was thinking of something else when I answered."

"I was only joking, Ted. You are too honest to be a mere flatterer. I like you better because you don't say silly things to me, and am just my good pard."

"Just as you say, Stella."

In the west the sun had sunk below the horizon, throwing into relief rugged heights and spirelike masses.

"What is that?" asked Stella, pointing to the curious silhouettes against the blazing sky.

"The edge of the Bad Lands," replied Ted.

"Do you suppose we shall get a chance to get into them? I have never seen any Bad Lands."

"And you never want to, if you can avoid it."

Now they were close to the ranch, and their tired ponies picked up their heels and put on a finishing spurt. Soon they were among a large concourse of cowboys from all parts of the range, who had come to attend the funeral of Bill Hicks.

It was a curious scene. Dotting the prairie around the ranch-house for a considerable distance were little groups of cowboys squatting before small camp-fires, cooking their suppers. Others were lying at full-length on the ground, with their heads on their saddles, sound asleep, for many of them had ridden all night to be present, and they would be on the back trail at moonup, which was about one o'clock in the morning.

The whole prairie was dotted with hobbled ponies.

But the strangest part of it was the silence that hung over this hasty bivouac. All who talked did so in subdued tones. Now there were no cries back and forth, no snatches of song or cowboy yells. They had just done the last honors to a brave comrade, and inside the ranch-house a bereft and grief-stricken girl was crying her heart out alone.

The camping cow-punchers looked up as Ted and Stella, followed by the boys, rode among them.

The newcomers were greeted with subdued "howd'ys" and looks of curiosity, while Stella, her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling from the ride, came in for many glances of frank admiration.

A young fellow rode out from the ranch-house to meet them.

He was a tawny, wiry chap, with a spice of the devil in his deep-blue eyes, and a certain easy swinging manner of riding.

"How'dy, hombre?" he said to Ted, at the same time tipping his sombrero to Stella.

"How'dy?" said Ted. "You're Ponk Truman, I believe."

"Ther same ole maverick."

"Then you're the man I came to see."

"Here I be."

"Stella, allow me to present Mr. Truman. This is Miss Fosdick."

Ponk Truman flushed a brighter red than his famous hair, of which it was said that a red summer sunset turned green with envy whenever Ponk took off his hat in its presence. Ponk had suddenly encountered Stella's smile, and an appreciative flash of her eyes, as he looked at her.

He managed to get his Stetson off, however, and mutter something unintelligible about "bein' moughty glad."

"Miss," he said, at last, when his confusion had somewhat subsided, "I'd take it moughty kind of you if you'd go inter ther house an' kinder throw a leetle comfort inter thet pore leetle gal in thar, what was ter marry Bill next month. She's jest cryin' her pretty head off, so's I cain't stay in ther house."

"Of course I will," said Stella gently. "Poor girl! I am very sorry for her." Ted had told her something of the circumstances of the death of Hicks.

Ponk swung off his pony and led the way to the house, and Stella and Ted followed him in.

"She's in that thar room," said Ponk. "Go right in and interdooce yerself. She'll be glad ter see yer, I'll bet my saddle."

What happened in the room no one except the two girls ever knew, but in a short time the weeping ceased.

"Now, hombre, what kin I do fer you?" asked Ponk.

"It was you who found the body of Hicks?" asked Ted.

"Yep, 'twas me," was the reply.

"You know Mrs. Crittenden?"

"A kinder lady ter a cow-puncher never lived!"

"And I suppose you know Phil Ramsey?"

"A bigger skunk never went unkilled, but he'll get his yet. He's got notice ter keep erway from this yere ranch, if he wants ter keep a fair exterior."

"Well, my business out here, and with you, concerns both of them, and the outlaw horse as well."

"Who be ye, pardner?"

"My name is Ted Strong."

"Sho! Yer don't say! I'm proud ter meet yer. Shake!"

Ted admired this strenuous, red-haired young cow-puncher, who stood as straight as an arrow, walked with the litheness of a panther, and rode like a demon.

The admiration was mutual, and they were soon sitting cross-legged out on the prairie, away from every one else, discussing the business that had brought Ted to the ranch.

Ted went carefully over the story told by Mrs. Crittenden, and as the tale unfolded Ponk nodded his head from time to time, as if what was said confirmed his own beliefs.

When Ted finished Ponk was lost in thought for several minutes.

"That what you have been sayin' clears up a lot o' things what I have been thinkin' myself," he said. "I know this Ramsey fer quite a spell, an' he's shore bad medicine. I always suspicioned thet he knowed more about ther death o' Cap Crittenden than he dared tell, but it wasn't up ter me ter make a holler."

"Do you think he is connected in any way with the condition of the horse Rex?"

"I ain't never seen him near that hoss, but I wânt ter say emphatic that somethin' out o' ther ordinary hez got him, an' some man hez done it."

"If Black Hawk, as Mrs. Crittenden calls him, is responsible for the horse's madness then he is many times a murderer of his fellow beings," said Ted, with a shudder. "The thing is to prove it."

"How air ye goin' ter do it?"

"I'm going out to get that horse."

A look of terror came into the eyes of Ponk.

"Don't do it, pard. He'll get ye, shore. He ain't missed one yet."

"Mrs. Crittenden says there was one man who went after him whom he didn't kill."

"Yes, I recollect now. That was ole Baldy Johnson, but he was so stove up thet he couldn't work on the range no more, an' hez ter live in town, pore feller, running a little seegar-store what Mrs. Crittenden set him up in."

"What number was he?"

"Seven."

"Good! Seven is a lucky number. I go out as fourteen, which is double seven. If there is anything in luck I shall bring in the Killer safely."

Ponk looked at Ted admiringly.

"You shore got yer nerve, kid," he said. "An' then I s'pose yer goin' after Ramsey."

"All the way."

"Kin I go along?" Ponk said somewhat wistfully.

"Sure. That's what I came here for. I want you to guide us to where the Killer is supposed to be ranging."

"I'm with yer in ther mornin'."

CHAPTER VII.

AN AMBUSCADE IN THE BAD LANDS.

"What's that cinnamon-haired puncher?"

A clear, jolly voice rang through the camp, and caused Ted, who had been sleeping with his head on his saddle, to rise up and look about.

There was something familiar in the ringing tones.

Across the prairie, threading his way among the sleeping men, came the cow-puncher whom Ted had seen at Silver Plume, he of the "frawg," whom the boys had called Frisk.

Ted caught his eye and beckoned him to where he was.

By Ted's side the redoubtable Ponk Truman lay sleeping.

He it was whom Frisk had designated the "cinnamon-haired puncher," and, as Frisk hurried toward him, Ted shook Ponk by the shoulder and roused him.

Here and there the cow-punchers were crawling out of their blankets and beginning to get breakfast, and soon the whole camp was astir.

The young rough riders were in a camp by themselves not far from where Ted and Ponk had camped for they had talked late into the night, and had withdrawn from the others that they might not be disturbed.

"What's ther row?" asked Ponk drowsily.

"A bunch o' strange punchers rode past here early this mornin', headed northwest," replied Frisk. "I was out lookin' fer my cayuse what had slipped his hobble. He's an ornery cuss when he's loose, an' likes ter make as much trouble as he can. I requisitions a pony an' goes after him."

"Did yer git him?" asked Ponk.

"I shore did. But I had ter ride a good piece before I found ther measly renegade, an' when I was towin' him in I hear a bunch o' hosses comin' from ther south. It's so dark I cain't see twenty feet ahead o' me."

"I leaves ther ponies behind and crawls so as to cut their trail. Pretty soon they come up, an' by ther starlight I sees Phil Ramsey, an' that bunch o' so-called cow-punchers what loafs around Silver Plume, trailin' along behind him. They was talkin' pretty free, bein' so near our camp, fer I could hear you snore, Ponk, from whar I was."

"Humph!" ejaculated Ponk. "What was they a-sayin'?"

"Ramsey was doin' most o' ther talkin'. I recognized his voice. I couldn't ketch all what he said, but it had ter do with the horse—*the* horse, mind you. There's only one horse in this part o' ther country that has ther right ter be called *the* horse, an' that's ther outlaw."

"An' what do yer reckon from what ye heard?"

"Thar was also Ted Strong's name inter the conversation, an' how they was goin' ter beat him to it, an' then they done some laughin'. From ther sounds what follered I jedge they wuz all takin' a drink o' liquor."

"Ther more they indulge in thet pastime ther better fer us. But this yere infermation of Frisk's means thet we got ter git inter our saddles right smart."

"The boys must have some breakfast," said Ted, who never forgot the comfort or health of his comrades.

"Right yer air," said Ponk. "While you're gittin' them up I'll go up ter ther house an' make them turn us out some breakfast, an' pack some grub fer us."

"What you all goin' ter do?" asked Frisk.

"We're goin' out after ther outlaw, an' fer good measure we're goin' ter gather in Mister Ramsey, Esquire, ther snake, an' before long he'll be havin' a new necktie, presented ter him by an admirin' constitoency."

"Gee! Say, Ponk, ain't I in on this?"

"It's up ter Mr. Ted Strong here. It's his expidition."

Frisk looked at Ted with amazement.

"Air ye Ted Strong, sure enough?" he asked.

Ted smiled and nodded his head.

"Won't yer take me along?" he asked. "I'm right handy with a gun, an' I'd jest love ter be in when this yere yaller dog Ramsey comes ter his finish. I've had it in for him fer a long time."

"Sure, you can go; we'd be glad to have you. I am not sure what we are going up against when we run across Ramsey's gang, and I had in mind to ask you and Ponk to go with us."

"All right, pard, I'll jest go an' fill my ole ca'tridge-belt with some o' Mr. Colt's little liver-pills, an' my system with sow-belly an' co'n bread, an' be with ye when ye give ther holler."

Ted roused the boys and told them to get ready for breakfast, and saddle and have their mounts ready to start immediately the meal was finished.

Stella had spent the night in the ranch-house with Maisie, and by morning had the poor girl fairly well resigned to her position.

The ranch-house cook, a disabled and ancient cow-puncher, was put to it to get up a meal for the boys in a hurry.

"Say, ole Flapjack," said Ponk, bursting into the kitchen, "do yer durndest ter git up a respectable meal, fer this ain't no bunch o' mavericks what couldn't tell ther difference between a friend saddle-blanket an' a piece o' angel food."

"What would yer like, boss?" said the cook, standing with legs apart and his fists on his hips. "Ther tarrapin is all out. I'm sorry, but I fed ther last dozen hummin'-birds ter a hungry puncher what blowed in, an' we're all out o' hothouse grapes an' fresh Spanish macker'l."

"Now don't yer stop ter josh me," retorted Ponk. "I'm li'ble ter take a sassy poke at yer, an' yer know me; I've give it ter ye before. Kill some chickens, and fry some aigs an' bacon, an' make up a mess o' fresh co'n bread. That'll do fer you. Now git busy."

Due to Ponk's decisive way of issuing orders the kitchen became a scene of the greatest activity at once. The cook and his assistants rushed here and there.

"Here, fellow, don't pick them chickens, skin 'em," shouted the cook to one of his assistants. To another: "*You* mix that co'n-meal, an' I'll do ther rest. Slice some bacon, Jones, an' then search ther hen-house fer some fresh aigs, while I make a pot o' fresh coffee."

"Now this is something like," said big Ben, when he saw the food upon the table. "This is something like a breakfast."

"Ben can't forget his little tummy," said Kit.

"*Ach Himmel,* I this could do forever," sighed Carl, as he stowed away the better part of the breast of a chicken.

"It certainly is good upholstering for a-thin fellow like me," said Kit. "Gimme some more chicken, bacon, eggs, corn bread, coffee, and anything else that isn't working around the festive board."

Stella joined them presently, and was told of the intention to move against Ramsey.

"Hadn't you better stay here with the young lady and wait until your aunt comes?" suggested Ted, although he knew the strenuous objection it would bring forth.

"No, siree," said Stella decisively. "The expedition does not start without me. I have already sent a man into Silver Plume with a note to aunt, telling her to come here, and have written another, which I will leave here, asking her to console her spirits here until I return. I knew there would be a start from here this morning, and I want to say with all proper emphasis that I am going with the expedition."

The boys all grinned, as Ted, with a look of resignation, said:

"All right, Stella. You'll have your own way, I suppose."

"And it may turn out a lucky thing for you that I do," retorted the young lady.

A cow-puncher was passing through the room, and Ponk Truman hailed him.

"Say, Billy," he said. "Go down to the corral and saddle that chestnut mare for this young lady, and bring it up to the house, won't you?"

"Bet I will," said the cow-puncher heartily.

Breakfast had begun to pall. Appetites that, at the beginning, it seemed impossible to satisfy were languishing, and Ted finally gave the signal that it was time to be on the way.

"Flapjacks, have yer got the supplies ready?" asked Ponk.

"I shore have," answered the cook.

In the bunch of saddle-horses in front of the house were two pack-animals loaded down with bacon, bread, corn-meal, and coffee, as well as the utensils necessary for camp cooking. No one knew how long they would be out.

"Saddles!" was Ted's laconic command.

Instantly every young rough rider sprang into his saddle.

"Hike!"

Ted and Stella, with Ponk hovering around, swung into the lead and they were off.

Ponk was guiding them to the place where he had found the body of Bill Hicks, and where the outlaw had been ranging for many months.

They were riding almost directly west, and soon came within sight of the strange conformation of the Bad Lands, the most irregular and confusing thing in nature.

The Bad Lands seemed not more than an hour's ride

away, yet hour after hour passed and the spires and pinnacles, the great square blocks that resembled houses, and the saw-tooth ridges seemed to be not much nearer than they were when they were first seen by the party.

Noon came and they halted for dinner. Not much time was wasted at this, and they struck once more across the brown Wyoming hills.

"Thar's a valley clost ter ther Bad Lands, an' thar's a sweet-water stream in it. Thet's ther only thing what saves ther place from bein' a purty close imitation o' Hades," said Ponk. "That's what kept ther outlaw in ther neighborhood. He likes ther grass, an' he's partial to ther sweet water."

"That's where we ought to find him?" asked Ted.

"Yep. Thar's whar I've always found him, an' that's whar he killed pore Bill."

They were in the saddle again, riding up one side of the great swells of prairie, and down the other.

Now the outposts of the Bad Lands leaped suddenly into prominence. They had crossed the last swell, and before them lay the valley.

Ted's field-glasses were out in a hurry, and he was scanning the valley from one end to the other.

Not a living thing was in sight.

Silently he passed the glasses over to Ponk, and they went from hand to hand, for each was eager to see for himself.

"Thar's whar ther outlaw has hung out fer a long time," said Ponk, in a tone of disappointment. "But he shore has vamosed."

"Let us ride down into the valley," said Ted. "I want to look the ground over."

He led the way.

Near the bank of the stream Ted halted and looked fixedly at the ground.

"That horse has been driven away from here," said Ted. "There are the marks of a dozen horses, and from the way they have stirred up the earth the outlaw must have given them the time of their lives."

Ponk was riding up and down the bank of the stream, looking for tracks, but found none.

"They've crossed over," said he. "We might as well do ther same. We may be able ter hit ther trail."

The whole cavalcade plunged into the water and forded and swam the stream.

"Here it is," shouted Ted. He had caught the trail of a number of horses.

"They've shore got ther outlaw," said Ponk. "But how did they do it without leavin' a dead man er so behind?"

"Hit the trail and keep going," said Ted.

The trail was as easy to follow as a sidewalk, and Ted hit up the pace to a gallop.

The trail led directly toward the Bad Lands.

Presently they were in the very shadow of the raw clay formation of the desolate and dreaded country which had been so appropriately named by the early settlers and discoverers.

The day had passed, and it was now early twilight.

"Ride!" shouted Ted. "They have a long start ahead of us."

Passing through a natural gateway made by two towering spires of clay, and into a narrow cañon, which had been washed into being by many floods, they were at last in the Bad Lands.

There was still a faint trail to be seen on the floor of the cañon, and with his eye on it Ted forced the pace.

Suddenly something happened.

A volley of rifle and revolver-shots rang out from the side of the cañon.

Ted's quick eye saw that they had no chance for their lives, save in immediate flight.

"Forward, at full speed!" His voice rang out almost harshly.

They had been ambuscaded, and were in the utmost danger.

Another volley rang out.

Ted heard a startled cry from Stella, and looking around he saw her horse rear and fall backward. He gasped with horror, expecting to see her fall beneath the wounded animal, and be crushed to death.

He wheeled his pony and dashed back, while the others swept on.

In an instant, it seemed, he was beside Stella, who had leaped from her pony's back and alighted on her feet.

Reaching down Ted grasped her and swung her into his saddle, and, bending over to protect her body from the hail of bullets, which were singing all about him, he dashed on to safety.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER VICTIM OF THE OUTLAW.

A short distance beyond the scene of the ambuscade the cañon made an abrupt turn, and there divided into several passages washed out of the clay formation of the Bad Lands.

At the bend the boys reined in their ponies, and took stock of one another.

"Where's Ted and Stella?" exclaimed Ben, running his eye over the party.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" shouted Bud Morgan. "We've left 'em behind. Who'll go back with me ter find 'em?"

Every boy in the party pushed forward.

"No, I reckon only three er four o' us orter go. That'll be enough fer swift work. Come on Ben an' Kit an' you, Mr. Ponk."

The ones chosen wheeled with him and sped back along the path they had come.

But they had not gone far when they heard the clatter of hoofs, and Ted came riding wildly toward them with Stella behind him, and they gave a ringing cheer of welcome.

"What happened?" asked Ben.

"Stella's pony got a bullet through the head and went down," answered Ted. "I thought she had gone forward with you fellows, when I happened to glance back, and saw her danger. I went back and picked her up and here we are."

In a few moments they had joined the boys around the bend of the cañon, and a conference was immediately held.

"They're a murderous lot," said Ted, "and I'm for going after them strong without delay to-night. If they get away from us now I'm afraid we'll have a hard time getting them."

"Right ye air," said Bud. "Forward ther light brigade, says he, an' we'll forward muy pronto."

"But first we must make some provision for Stella, and find her a safe hiding-place."

"I don't want to be put in cold storage," pouted Stella. "And just when things are beginning to get exciting."

"Can't help it, Stella," said Ted. "We have no horse for you just now, and you know that it will be impossible for you to follow us afoot."

"I suppose you are right, but I hate to be cooped up like an old hen while you fellows are out enjoying the scrimmage."

"Sorry, but it can't be helped."

"I was skirmishin' eround here a bit, an' I see what would make a crackin' fine hidin'-place," said Ponk Truman.

"What is it?" asked Ted.

"It's a dishlike depression on top of a butte up ther alley here a piece."

"Any way of getting to it?"

"Yes, an' it's so carefully concealed no one would suspect its existence, and would only discover it by accident."

"That sounds like the very thing. Let us go and take a look at it."

Accompanied by Stella, Ted and Ponk walked up the narrow cañon a few hundred yards, between sheer walls, until they came to an irregularly shaped crevice which ran from the top to the bottom of the wall.

The crack slanted diagonally into the wall so that from certain angles it was invisible.

Ponk had to search up and down the wall several minutes before he could find it again.

The crevice was so narrow that it was all Ponk could do to squeeze through it.

"Come in!" he shouted, after he had disappeared from sight.

Stella's slender figure slipped into the crevice without difficulty, and Ted followed.

Within, the crevice opened out into a well-like shaft, at the top of which could be seen the afterglow of the setting sun on the sky.

On one side of the wall were steps irregularly hewn by nature in the wall.

"It's as easy as going up a pair o' stairs," said Ponk, leading the way up, and followed by Ted and Stella.

It was perhaps forty feet to the top, and the ascent was so gradual as to be lacking in danger.

Arriving at the top they stopped in amazement.

All around them, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the yellow-and-gray surface of the Bad Lands, and a more desolate scene it would be difficult to portray. The crevices in the earth, caused at remote times by terrific floods, looked from the height like a cracked mud-flat in dry weather, out of which rose at intervals spires of eroded yellow clay, and all manner of fantastic forms, which the setting sun caused to throw weird shadows. It was like the figment of a disordered brain, the eery imaginings of a maniac. Stella shuddered as she looked over it.

"I didn't think it would make much of a hit with you," said Ted.

"It is horrible," said Stella, turning her back upon it.

"But this is a pretty comfy place for you to camp until we come for you. See, if it rains you can crawl beneath that shelf. That little cave is just about large enough to hold you, but if it were me I think my long legs would stick out into the wet."

Stella was walking around the basin which the elements had scooped in the top of the butte, examining it carefully.

"See here, Ted," she cried, at last, "we're not the first to have come here. There are ashes, and here are the remains of burned bones."

Ted went to her side, and examined the débris she had found.

"You are right, Stella," he replied. "Some one has camped here before, and not one, but many. Look, here are the ashes of many fires mingled with the dust by the rain and wind. Did you ever hear of this place before, Ponk?"

"I've been thinking that this might be what is called the 'Robbers' Roost,'" replied Ponk. "There is such a place over in the Bad Lands somewhere."

"How was it used?"

"When things got too hot fer a rustler er a murderer in Cheyenne er Laramie he lit out fer ther Bad Lands. Fellers what would come back after their troubles blowed over used ter laugh eround about ther 'Roost,' an' say thet no officer could find it, an' that it was as safe as bein' in Canada er ther no'th pole."

"Did they ever try to find it?"

"Purty near every depooty marshal, sheriff, an' their posses took a whack at it, but none ever even got a smell o' it."

"But it seems as if we had accidentally stumbled onto it, for it sure has been a hiding-place in the past, and not so far back, either."

"I reckon yer right, but this will destroy its usefulness from now on."

Ted was looking up at the sky, reading the weather. Ted was an expert at sky-reading, and his predictions seldom failed, as they were based on his knowledge of the Western climate and long and studious reading of the clouds.

"Think she's goin' ter rain?" asked Ponk.

"There's a big rain over to the west, and the clouds are building up rapidly. If they get into the southwest, we'll have a hummer."

"But the blackest clouds are in the south, Ted," said Stella.

"Yes, and that is where it is raining. I'm not worrying about that cloud. Most of its damage is done. Ponk, I wish you'd go down to my saddle and get that pair of blankets and the slicker off it, and go into the saddle-bags and dig out the best you've got, and fill a canteen with water, and bring the lot up here. We must make Miss Stella comfortable for the night, for we may not get back until morning."

Ponk turned away with alacrity, and disappeared down the shaft.

"Now, Stella," said Ted, "don't be afraid. No one can reach you, or could find you here. We'll probably be chasing Ramsey and his gang all night, and whether we catch him, or not, we will be back here for you. Eat supper, roll yourself up in your blanket, and gaze at these brilliant Wyoming stars until you fall asleep."

"All right, Ted; I'm not a bit afraid, but I do wish I was going along with you," she said wistfully.

"We'll rustle up a horse for you from that gang before long, or I'll miss my guess."

Ponk came staggering up the wall with his burden, and both the boys did all they could to make Stella comfortable.

Then they bade her good night, and rejoined the other boys. At once Ted began to lay a plan of action.

"We are as many as that bunch of cutthroats," he said.

"We have three more'n they hev," said Frisk. "I see 'em an' counted 'em as they rode past in single file."

"Well, I guess we'll need all we've got. They're a murderous lot, and will shoot to kill, while we will shoot to disable only. And by all means we want to capture Ramsey alive. They need him in the courts in Cheyenne, where they do not hesitate to enforce the law."

"It's a lucky thing fer him thet he hez ter do with you, Ted Strong, fer, knowin' what we do now, he wouldn't last any longer than ther shortest prayer if ther boys over at the Double Heart an' ther Hay Creek ranches were ter get holt o' him," said the ruby-haired Ponk, his gray eyes snapping like embers from a campfire.

"Well, he'll sure get a fair chance with this outfit. Now, what is the best thing to do? I don't suppose those fellows have stuck to their place of ambush, and we might scout there a bit. If they are gone, we may hit their trail, and will follow them."

"Say, Ted," said Ponk, "what do yer make o' that thar sky?"

Ted threw a hasty glance at as much of the sky as was visible from the high-walled narrow slit in which they were.

It was very close in there, and not a breath of air was moving. The remaining light of the day was curiously colored, between a faint rose and sulfur, and the sky was of the same unearthly hue.

It cast an almost terrifying radiance over the barren and unprofitable land in which they were.

The more Ted examined the sky the more puzzled he was.

"I have never seen anything like it before," he answered, in a subdued tone.

"I never seen it but once, an' that night ther State o' Wyoming jest nacherly tore herself wide open an' turned herself upside down," said Ponk.

"It don't look like a rainy sky," said Ted.

"Well, it rained some that night. But yer cain't tell nothing what ther weather will do out yere in Wyoming, onless ye've lived here an' growed up with ther country since ther year one."

"Come on, Bud, let's go an' take a look fer Ramsey an' his gang," said Ted. "You boys hang around here for awhile. We'll fire two quick shots as a signal to come on."

Ted and Bud rode rapidly forward to the scene of the ambuscade. As they got close to it they dismounted and crept forward in true scout fashion.

They found a passage leading off the cañon by which they had entered the Bad Lands. This was where the gang had concealed itself when it had fired upon the rough riders.

It was deserted.

Ted could see far down its rapidly darkening exterior.

He pressed forward hurriedly, looking for the tracks of the horses. There were none.

The gang had probably hidden them behind the turn at the end of the passage.

Then he stumbled over something soft, and almost went headlong.

Lighting a match he stooped forward to examine the bundle at his feet.

It was the battered body of a man.

Rex, the Killer, the outlaw, had claimed another victim.

CHAPTER IX.

TED SHOWS STRATEGY.

Around the bend of the deep gully, for it could not be dignified by the name cañon, they came upon the tracks of the horses.

Ted fired two shots, and it was not long before he and Bud were joined by the other boys.

"They trail off to the west," said Ted. This gully split into three others, which ran in as many directions, but Ted had dismounted, and had followed the trail in the fading light for several hundred yards while waiting the arrival of the others.

"Fellows," said Ted, "this is going to be the hardest piece of trailing any of us has ever done."

"Why so?" asked Kit, who had great faith in Ted's ability as a trailer and scout.

"For the reason that this section of the Bad Lands is to be compared to one of those crystal mazes, where you wander through innumerable intricate passages only to return time after time to the place whence you started.

"When these Bad Lands were formed the waters rushed through, eating outlets here and there, wherever they found the least resistence. Consequently the whole surface of the country is cut up into gullies of varying depths, running into one another from every conceivable direction.

"It is a perfect labyrinth of passages, leading into the interior for many miles. Every fellow must take good heed of the direction in which we are traveling, and if any one finds himself separated from the others in the darkness he must stop and shoot a lost signal, which will be two pistol-shots close together, and another after a short interval. If any of us get lost or separated from the main body, it will probably mean death."

"Yer cain't lose me," said Bud. "I stick to ther crowd."

This sentiment met with general endorsement.

"I shore don't see how we're goin' ter foller a trail in the dark, at the bottom of these pockets of clay," remarked Frisk. "But that ain't sayin' it cain't be did, fer I'm shore slow on ther trail myself."

"It isn't the easiest thing in the world," returned Ted. "But the moon will soon be up, and that will help us not a little. I see by the color of the sky that she is rising. When she gets right over us we will be able to see the floor, and the marks in the dust."

Darkness came on suddenly, and the passage they were slowly following was as black as the inside of an ink-pot.

Suddenly Ted, who was in the lead, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and shouted "Halt!"

The boys reined in and stood still.

"What's the matter?" several of the boys called out, anxiety in their voices.

"We're up against a wall here. My horse bumped into it. Wait a minute."

They saw a flash of light. It was Ted's pocket search-light; he was examining the wall in front of him.

"It's all right, boys. Here's a way out," shouted Ted. "Let your ponies follow mine in single file, and don't press them until I see what is in front of us."

Soon Ted emerged into a circular basin scooped out of the clay, with irregular and crumbling walls.

Here he dismounted and went forward slowly, leading his pony, searching the ground for the trail of the Ramsey gang, with the aid of his "fire stick," as Bud called his pocket search-light.

Suddenly he stopped. "Here we are," he called. "They came this way, all right. But it's pretty slow work trailing them like this. If the moon would only come out we could see the trail, and follow on faster."

They were still in the basin, when suddenly they halted, every ear strained.

There had come to them a scream, in which sounded fear, agony, hatred, rage. But such a voice!

"Great Heaven! what was that?" asked Ted.

No one answered, because no one knew. The horrible noise had got on their nerves.

"It's not a panther, and it's not a wolf," said Ted. "But certainly I never heard a more horrible and weird sound. I wonder what it is."

Again the horrid scream reached their ears.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" cried Bud.

"What is it?' 'exclaimed Ted. His nerves were on edge, as were those of every member of the party.

"Don't you know what thet thar is?" asked Bud, in a hushed voice.

No one answered, for the intervals between the screams were becoming shorter, and the noise louder, indicating that it was approaching them, and swiftly.

"What is it?" asked Ted impatiently.

"It's the mad horse, the Killer," said Bud slowly.

"Great Scott! I believe you are right, and if it finds us we are in for a lot of trouble. I wish it was lighter that we might be able to see it and have a better chance to fight it. I wonder where it comes from. Evidently Ramsey is not far from here, and the beast has escaped from him. It smells our horses, and is coming to find them."

Now they could hear the hoof-beats of the horse, faint, but growing louder, and at intervals the maniacal scream.

Ted climbed into his saddle and was watching the walls of the basin for the appearance of the outlaw. He did not know on which side the exit they were looking for was situated, and the only way in which he would know of its approach would be by the sense of hearing, for it was still as dark as a pocket in the basin.

He looked at the sky. Not a star was visible, but by the faint luminosity of the clouds he knew that the moon was overhead.

Ted prayed that the clouds might roll away, and even as he did so they began to get thin, and so suddenly that it came like a search-light flash, the moon burst forth, making the basin almost as light as day.

By its light the boys beheld a strange and terrifying spectacle.

Suddenly there bounded from the mouth of a black passage the mad horse.

He was a powerful brute, about seventeen hands high, with a wide, deep chest, and a large, strong head.

It came galloping at top speed, shaking its head from side to side, and emitting its horrible screams, which, the boys now detected, had a tone of extreme pain in them.

For a few moments it paid no attention to the group of horsemen occupying the center of the basin.

It was half-way across, when suddenly it stopped and faced them.

Its eyes blazed in the moonlight like balls of fire, and it tossed foam from its champing mouth as it swung its head.

"That horse is suffering from something, evidently a beating," muttered Ted to Bud, who was beside him.

"He looks loco ter me," said Bud.

"Whatever he is, he is going to attack. Boys, watch him, and keep busy dodging him. Don't let him get near enough to sink his teeth into you, or it will be all off with you. Above all don't permit yourselves to be dismounted. That is what has caused the deaths of all the outlaw's victims."

Evidently the Killer was debating with himself whether or not to attack this new enemy. Suddenly he made up his mind.

With a scream of hate he leaped several feet into the air, and when he alighted he made straight for Ted in a series of bounds.

His jaws were wide-spread, and the foam dripped from them.

When he came close Ted suddenly swung Sultan out of the way. Sultan seemed to understand the situation as well as if he had been a man, for he wheeled aside with the agility of a cat. At the same time Ted drew back his arm and brought his quirt across the outlaw's face, in an endeavor to distract his attention from whatever form of excitement the brute was laboring under.

At the blow the outlaw gave vent to another scream, and began to run amuck among the horses, biting savagely, rearing, and striking with his fore feet as if he were a boxer.

A man on the ground would not have lasted a minute before the maddened beast. He would have been knocked down and kicked and trampled to a pulp in a moment.

But the boys spread out and managed to avoid him.

Once there was almost the beginning of the end for the pony Kit was riding. In wheeling out of the way of the maddened beast the pony was a trifle slow in his movements, and as the Killer rushed past he reached out and got the pony's neck just above the shoulders between his teeth, and was bearing him down.

The pony was squealing with pain and fright, and was trying to back away, while Kit was beating the outlaw over the eyes with his quirt.

At last the brute released his hold, and Kit swung rapidly out of reach.

Again the mad horse leaped to the attack, walking on his hind legs and beating the air with his fore feet. His eyes were glaring this way and that, searching for a victim.

Ted had cautioned the boys to keep moving around in a circle in order to confuse the outlaw.

Ted and Bud were riding side by side discussing the advisability of shooting the brute, which Bud had suggested, but which Ted opposed.

"I've an idea," said Ted. "Let me have your slicker. Stella has mine. I think I can put a crimp in that fellow."

Bud swiftly untied the new yellow slicker from the back of his saddle and passed it over to Ted, who unrolled it and shook it out.

The mad horse was standing in the middle of the circle formed by the boys, his head lowered and rolling from side to side, while occasionally he screamed in very wantoness.

Evidently he was looking to catch one of his enemies napping.

Without warning, yelling like a Comanche, and waving the slicker in front of him, Ted charged upon the outlaw.

As he did so the mad horse stood upon its hind legs, ready for an attack. As Ted drew close the brute came down with his hoofs. But Ted dodged to one side, and as he did so he slapped the beast across the eyes with the slicker. This made him lower his head with many tossings, and a hoarse bellow, in which there was a note of fear.

While it was doing this Ted rode rapidly around it and came up on the other side, and again slapped the slicker in the face of the mad horse.

Then he rode away, and faced about when twenty feet off. The boys were watching Ted's exhibition of courage and ingenuity with admiration.

Without giving the outlaw much time to recover from his confusion, Ted charged once more, waving the slicker frantically.

This time the horse began to back away. The fire seemed to have been taken out of him.

Ted rode close to him, and again slapped him in the face.

That settled it with the Killer. He did not understand warfare with a slicker.

With a whimpering cry he turned tail and fled.

"After him, boys!" shouted Ted.

As they set out in pursuit of the outlaw they fired their revolvers in the air.

On he dashed through the narrow and twisted cañons, until, without warning, they were galloping through a camp of sleeping men, leaping bodies and scattering pans and the embers of a dying fire.

It was Ramsey's camp, and the men had set no guard.

Believing that they were the victims of a midnight raid they leaped up, and before the boys could stop their flight the Ramsey gang were in their saddles and fleeing down another passage.

Although the boys worked for another hour trying to find them in the labyrinthine passages they were compelled to give up the search.

CHAPTER X.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

It was now past midnight. They had been following many confusing passages without hearing anything of Ramsey and his gang.

Night in the Bad Lands is a gruesome time, especially by moonlight. Such strange shadows cross the crevasses, such uncanny noises break the desert solitude and silence, that it takes a stout heart to endure it without a quake.

As the boys walked their horses in single file through the labyrinth not a word was spoken. All felt a sense of oppression. It was not fear, but a feeling of impending disaster.

The moon was riding down the western sky, and the light in the passages was fading. They did not know whither they were drifting, for while they would be going west at one moment, the next they might turn directly north, and a few minutes later find themselves going east or south, or any other points of the compass.

At last they came to a sudden halt. They were in a pocket at the end of a passage which they had been following for ten minutes.

"It's no use, boys," said Ted, dismounting. "We might as well stay here until daylight. We can go no farther, and the horses are nearly played out."

A sigh of relief greeted this welcome announcement, and the boys dropped stiffly from their saddles, and stretched themselves.

They unsaddled and hobbled their animals, and lay down on the ground to sleep. No one offered a remark; they were all too tired and depressed to do so.

When all was quiet Ted arose, and at the expense of a great deal of effort climbed the almost precipitous wall of clay to the top, and looked over the surrounding country.

It was as if a great sheet of pale-yellow paper had been spread out over the face of the land, and a gigantic pen had traced on it lines of the most erratic sort. The background was the black bulk of the mountains in the west, and above them a bank of dense black cloud, through which at intervals shot vivid streaks of lightning. The moon was, apparently, close above the black cloud, and the night was very still, not a breath of air stirring.

Momentarily the cloud in the west built up toward the zenith, and the lightning flashes increased in frequency and fierceness.

"We're going to have a terrible rain," said Ted to himself. "She's headed this way. We're fortunate to be here instead of out on the prairie, where we'd be washed away."

Suddenly there was a flutter in the air. It was very faint, but it foretold a wind. This, however, would be welcome, as it was very hot and sultry.

In a few minutes the wind came up, a soft breeze that blew in gusts. It was the forerunner of the storm, and carried with it all manner of unusual sounds.

As he listened to these Ted's trained ear caught one more ominous than the others. It was a long, low, mournful wail.

"Wolves!" he muttered.

Presently he heard other wails of the same sort, and prolonged howls. They were so frequent and loud that they rose high above the sound of the wind which was growing stronger and noisier as the black cloud continued to fill the heavens.

"It'll be on us inside of a half-hour," thought Ted. "I wonder how Stella is getting on. I hope she is not frightened. But she is probably asleep by this time, and knows nothing about the coming storm."

He then bethought himself of his comrades below, and was just preparing to climb down the wall again when he heard a faint rustling noise at his feet.

Looking down, he saw that which made him recoil with horror. He had almost put his foot upon an enormous rattlesnake, which was in the act of coiling itself for a strike.

Before stepping back he looked over his shoulder, and in the dim light saw another snake, and beyond that others, until, as his eyes got accustomed to looking at the ground in the dim light, he saw that the top of the butte on which he was standing was almost covered with the venomous reptiles.

"There is going to be a flood," he muttered. "The snakes are taking to the high land."

Fortunately he had not come far from the edge of the wall up which he had climbed, and by careful footwork he was able to get to it without stepping on any of the snakes, although the air was fairly vibrating with the sound of their rattling.

It did not take him long to reach the bottom and arouse the boys from their slumber, to warn them of the coming storm.

"I hardly know what to do," said Ted. "It's a sure thing that these Bad Lands are the result of heavy rains, probably cloudbursts, following one another in the succeeding years. Whether the storm which will break soon will do any such damage or not, I don't know. We might climb to the top of these buttes, but what would become of the horses?"

"Rather, what would become of us if we lost our horses in this inferno," said Kit gloomily.

"True, Kit. We'd be in a pretty bad predicament. We'll have to take a chance, and stick to the horses. Perhaps, after all, it will only be a heavy rain, which should not interfere with us to any great extent."

"What's that at the end of the passage?" asked Ben, drawing his revolver.

Every one looked in that direction. In the dark they saw several points of steady, greenish light that did not flicker.

"Strange thing, that," said Kit.

"Dey look as lickerish lights seen mit der distance," ventured Carl.

Without warning a revolver went off, and the lights went out.

"A pack of wolves," said Ted. "I sure got one of them. I heard them howling when I was on top of the butte. From the noise they made, the Bad Lands is full of them."

"Right yer are," said Ponk. "They come off the plains and out o' ther woods on ther hills ter breed in ther caves an' holes in this forsaken land, an' they're pretty tol'ble fierce at this time, too."

"I suppose they know as well, or better than we, that a storm is coming, and they are fleeing before it."

"That's about ther caper. We'll see plenty o' queer things before it's over, if it turns out to be anything like what I expect from past performances. Boys, I want ter tell yer somethin' shore, we're in a fix right now. Thar ain't no use ter try ter run before it, fer we couldn't git out before ther storm reaches us if we run our hosses at the rate o' fifty miles an' hour. We'd never find our way out in this darkness, an' we might get into a worse place than this." Ponk's tone was prodigiously solemn.

"How do you make that out?" asked Ted.

"Because if it proves to be a cloudburst, which is what generally happens in this hole, an' ther bloomin' place fills up with water, we'll be in back water. If we were out there we'd be in ther current, and Heaven only knows whar we'd be washed to."

"I believe you are right," said Ted. "I'm for staying right here, and doing the best we can. But I am quite willing to do what the majority think best."

"I'll stick for the big show," said Ben.

"Me too," came promptly from Kit.

"I'd a doodle be if I didn't stay mit der bunch," ejaculated Carl.

One by one the boys asserted that they would stick to Ted.

"Very well then," said Ted. "Saddle your ponies, get your slickers ready, and wait until she breaks. That is all there is to do now. When the emergency comes we will meet it. Only don't forget to stick together as long as we can."

It did not take long to make all the necessary preparations, and they mounted and sat waiting for the storm to break.

The horses, scenting the storm from afar, were very uneasy, and it was difficult to restrain them.

Overhead the sky was a constant glare of red from the terrific electrical activity. Bolts and sheets of fire shot and spread across the sky.

The low bellow of the distant thunder was growing louder momentarily, while the wind, which was rising, had increased from a murmur to a shriek.

Then followed a dull booming sound that drowned the others in its tremendous volume.

"She's coming," said Ted. "That's the rain. It's some miles off yet, but it won't take long to get here, and when she arrives she'll be a hummer. Get ready to meet her."

Above the booming of the rain now arose the howls and wails of wild animals as they fled before the storm. Into the pocket in which our heroes were awaiting it they scampered, attracted by the presence of human beings, as wild animals will in times of great stress and danger. At such times they seem to know instinctively that their natural enemy, being a sharer of the common danger, will not harm them. Their instinct seems to tell them that the intelligence of man is superior to their own, and that if there is any place of safety there will man be found.

Slinking into the pocket were wolves, coyotes, foxes, wildcats, prairie-dogs, and the smaller gophers and ground-squirrels.

Where they came from was the mystery. During the day no traveler through the Bad Lands could get a glimpse of them, but here, in the hour of their danger, they had left their burrows in search of safety.

"Say, boys," said Ponk, an anxious tone in his voice, "this is goin' ter be a lallapaloosa of a storm. Whenever yer see ther wild animiles turn out like this an' try ter rub noses with white men it shows they're plumb scared, an' they come pretty near knowin' what's comin' off in the storm line."

He had hardly finished speaking when Carl gave a yell.

"What's the matter, Carl?" asked Ted.

"*Ach Himmel!* a great big wolf is trying up my leg to climb. He vants into my lap to get, und I decline der introductionen. Take him avay!"

"He's all right, he's only tryin' ter make love ter yer," said Bud. "Yer sich a fascinatin' duck. I allays did hear thet wolves wuz particular fond o' nice fat Germany boys."

So they were able to joke in the face of danger.

Suddenly there was a crash in the heavens. It appeared to be directly above their heads, and almost crushed them to the earth, so terrible was its force. Their horses trembled and acted as if they had gone insane. It took all their strength to control the terrified brutes.

The wolves and other wild animals were running about among the horses, whining and moaning their fear.

Then came the flood.

The water poured out of the heaven in a solid mass, it appeared. It was all the horses could do to stand up under its force.

Above the roar of the rain came another sound.

Ted had been listening for it. It was the noise of rushing water; the tumbling roar of the cataract.

The rain had been so heavy that the waters poured upon the Bad Lands farther west was rushing through the passages, and perhaps eating new ones in the clay walls.

This rushing water, uniting with that still falling with unabated fury, soon began to tell in the pocket in which the boys were. It had risen to the ankles of the horses. Now it was knee-high.

Suddenly, and without apparent reason, it began to climb with incredible swiftness, higher and higher.

The smaller animals were all swimming now in the eddy that the back water made in the pocket.

"My pony's off his feet," shouted Kit, above the roar of the rain and rushing water.

In a moment or two all the horses were swimming.

"All we can do is to keep them swimming in this eddy," shouted Ted. "Do not let them get outside."

But now a new and unthought-of thing arose.

The wolves, made bold by danger, were trying to climb upon the backs of the horses or into the saddles with the boys.

The first that tried was pushed away, but as they returned again and again to the effort, their fear made them savage, and when an attempt was made to put them aside they snapped at the boys' hands.

"Whenever a wolf gets gay, and tries to bite, you shoot him through the head," shouted Ted.

After that the crack of a revolver was heard every few moments, and soon the wolves were pretty well thinned out, and those that remained were so cowed that they did not attempt any familiarities.

So the hours passed away, the horses swimming wearily around in the swirling water, only kept above the surface by the pluck of their riders, who talked to them and encouraged them.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

The boys gave a great shout of thanksgiving. At the same time the first streaks of dawn appeared in the east.

With the ceasing of the rain the waters began to fall, and soon were running away as in a mill-race.

CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

When Stella saw Ted and Ponk climb down from her hiding-place on top of the butte, her spirits fell to the lowest ebb.

Her woman's intuition, than which there is nothing more likely to be correct in this world, where "man proposes, but God disposes," told her that she was in danger.

But she knew Ted well enough, and realized the burden she would have been to him unmounted too well, to oppose his will in the matter.

However, she felt that all was not well.

For an hour or more she sat on the edge of the basin, with her chin in her hand looking over the desolate scene, which did not serve to raise her spirits.

She wished now that she had taken Ted's advice and stayed at the Hay Creek Ranch with Maisie, to await the coming of her aunt, Mrs. Graham, who, she knew, would be angry with her for starting off with the expedition.

Stella was not a coward, either physical or moral, and was in the habit of reviewing her own conduct on occasion with more frankness than any of her friends dare exercise.

She realized now that she had been headstrong in refusing to take Ted's advice, and staying behind.

She sighed, and wished she was in the comfortable ranch-house, for she was getting very lonely, with no better company than the desolate spires of clay that she could see from her aerie on the butte-top.

For a time she amused herself by watching the wonderful sunset that gilded and crimsoned the sky. Then she caught a little lizard that had crept close enough to watch her with its lazy, blinking eyes.

At first the lizard was very much frightened, and made strenuous efforts to escape, but she caressed it and stroked its back so gently that at last it lay quite still in the palm of her hand, and when she put it on her shoulder it crawled to a comfortable place, and stayed there until it fell asleep.

As the sun went down she ate the food Ponk had brought her, took a draft from the canteen, and made her bed under the jutting shelf.

The floor of this small cave fortunately sloped down, and she knew that if it rained she would probably be able to keep dry. First, she spread the slicker out flat and

placed one of the blankets on top of it, then folded the other blanket back so that she could crawl under it when she got sleepy.

These little housewifely duties, for as such she thought of them, had the effect of raising the gloom that filled her soul somewhat, and she went out to the edge of the butte to watch the night fall on the Bad Lands.

She had expressed a wish to Ted to see the Bad Lands, and he had advised against it. Now, having seen them, she lost all interest in them.

Stella was of such a sprightly and happy disposition that she constantly craved company and action, and the dulness of her present condition bored her so that soon she began to yawn.

"Oh, fudge!" she finally exclaimed. "I can't stand this sort of thing. I'm going to sleep and forget it."

She put away her lizard, crawled into her blankets, and was soon fast asleep.

It was past midnight when a man slipped through the crevice in the butte and proceeded to climb the steps to the top.

When he arrived there he sat on the edge of the basin, and looked off to the west.

He was panting heavily from his exertions.

Suddenly the heavens were lighted with the glare from the black cloud that was rising in the west.

"She's goin' ter be ther worst rain ther ole hole hez seen sence 'seventy-six," he muttered to himself.

"Thar won't nothin' live in them runs when they gits full o' rain. I reckon thar won't be nothin' left o' thet bunch o' young squirts what come out huntin' Phil. They'll all be plumb washed away an' drownded.

"I jest reckoned I couldn't git back ter ther camp, an' I thinks o' ther ole roost, so here I comes ter stay till ther storm blows over.

"Gee, but I've roosted here many the time when ther officers was lookin' fer me all through this hole, an' I see 'em nosin' around searchin' fer the 'Robbers' Roost,' an' they were right under it, so's I could hev drapped a rock on 'em."

The fellow began to chuckle to himself at the thought of how many times he had evaded or hoodwinked the officers of the law.

He cut off a chew of tobacco, slipped it into his cavernous mouth, and sat looking at the approaching cloud.

As a spectacle its grandeur affected even this rough and hardened criminal.

"That's a cloud fer yer life," he said to himself. "That's the kind I like ter see. None o' these little pink-an'-gold clouds in mine, but a good big black, blusterin' cloud, full o' roar, an' hell fire an' destruction. An' I reckon ye've got all ther proper ellyments in yer ole cloud, exceptin' thet yer carries water. But thar ain't nothin' perfect in nature, I oncet heerd a science-sharp say. But if yer hed whisky in yer instead o' water ye'd be jest right."

He felt the wind come up, and removed his hat to let it sweep across his forehead.

Stella was sound asleep, her breathing as regular as that of a babe.

"Well, dog my cats if I ain't glad ter be up here when thet ole cloud blows open," the fellow continued to ruminate. "She'll flood ther Bad Lands from ther bottom up, sure's my name's Bill Bones."

The storm came on apace with the crash of thunder and the distant roaring of the rain.

Stella heard nothing of it. She was sleeping like a tired, and vigorous, and healthy girl.

"I reckon I'll crawl under thet ledge when she busts," said Bill Bones.

The storm was not long in "busting," for in a few moments the roar of the torrent was upon them.

The terrific uproar of the rain aroused Stella from a dream, and she sat up in her blankets and stared out.

It was so dark that she could not see a foot in front of her, but she was conscious that a deluge of rain was falling, and was thankful that she was safe and dry.

Suddenly something pushed beneath the shelf beside her.

For a moment she was too startled to utter a sound or move a muscle.

She did not know whether it was a man or an animal. One was as bad as the other.

The intruder was quite as silent as she. Then she heard the click of a revolver, and felt for her own. It was not in its holster. It must have been thrown out when she leaped from her pony.

"Who's thar?" demanded a hoarse voice.

Stella was almost paralyzed at the loss of her revolver, which in times of peril had always given her a confidence that nothing else had the power to do.

She did not reply to the challenge, and heard the man moving softly toward her.

"Who's thar? Answer, er I'll fire."

This time the command was more peremptory.

Still Stella hesitated. As a matter of fact, she had not the voice to reply.

"One, two——"

"It's me!" cried Stella, in a still, small voice.

"Aha! a female woman, is it?" exclaimed Bill Bones. "What air ye doin' here?"

"Just resting," answered Stella. "Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. I'll take a look at you."

He took a match from his pocket, struck it along the roof of the shelf, and held it close to Stella's face.

"A find, by hokey, a find!" Bones shouted. "Phil Ramsey'll be glad ter see yer. Yer ther gal what was with thet snip Strong. Now we'll see how far that young gent will go."

"You scoundrel," said Stella wrathfully. "I'd advise you to be careful how you treat me if you don't want to get into the worst trouble that has ever come your way yet."

"Ha, ha! Young woman, yer make me laugh. That kid, why I'd bite him in two with jest one chaw if he ever come within reach o' my arm. Don't talk like that, er I might not like yer. Jest be a good girl, an' do as Bill Bones tells yer, an' ye'll be treated like a lady."

Stella saw that she was in the power of the fellow for the present, and that it would be good policy not to cross him, so she subsided into her corner and said no more.

She knew that as soon as daylight came Ted would be there, and all would be well.

Soon it was daylight. The waters had subsided, and the way was clear.

Bill Bones left the shelter, and took a look around.

"Come on," he said. "It's time to be travelin'."

"I'm not going to leave here until Ted Strong comes," answered Stella. "He's likely to be along at any moment."

"That's one reason why we're goin' ter move so soon," said Bones. Come erlong nice an' quietlike, if yer don't——"

"Well, what if I don't?" said Stella defiantly.

"Why, I reckon I'll hev ter tie yer an' carry ye."

"I dare you to do it."

"I never took a dare in me whole life. Here goes."

He unbuckled a strap from around his waist, and walked toward her.

The thought of contact with this dirty ruffian conquered her.

"Don't touch me, and I'll go with you," she said.

"Come along then, an' no monkey-business, er I'll——"

He made a gesture of picking her up and carrying her, and she followed him.

* * * * * * *

The water having run out of the pocket in which the boys had weathered the storm, Ted was eager to go to the Robbers' Roost and relieve Stella of the anxious position in which she must have found herself. He reproached himself for having left her there, even though he knew that it was unavoidable.

But the horses were exhausted with their efforts to keep above the flood, and he allowed them to rest awhile. The boys were very tired also, as well as hungry.

Ben and Kit started a fire from a bundle of wood they had brought in one of the packs, and the fellows began to dry themselves while Ponk took charge of the breakfast.

It was nine o'clock before they were ready to start.

Bud was the guide, on account of his rare ability to back track even under the most discouraging circumstances.

They followed Bud at a gallop wherever the passage was wide enough to admit of it. Instead of going the way they had come, Bud had observed a shorter way, which he took, and by ten o'clock they had reached the Robbers' Roost butte.

As they approached it Ted gave the call, "Cooee!" and paused to hear the answering cry. It did not come, and he leaped from his pony and ran to the crevice.

It was a matter of a few moments only for him to reach the top. His eye took in the whole top of the butte at one sweep. Stella was not there.

His blankets and slicker were under the ledge, and showed that they had been slept in.

Bud, Ben, Kit, and Carl had followed Ted to the top, and their faces expressed the surprise and anxiety they all felt.

Ted was wavering between grief and rage.

"She's gone," was all he could say.

"Yes, and she hasn't been gone long," said Bud. "See, she slept here all night, for surely she wouldn't venture out in that rain."

"Perhaps she got tired of staying up here alone, and went down to take a walk, and hasn't got back yet," said Kit, in a comforting way, seeing Ted's distress.

"No, she has been taken away," said Ted, whose face was drawn and white. "See, here is her footprint, and beside it that of a man. The track is faint, as this substance is as hard as rock almost."

They all looked at the mark. There could be no doubt that Ted was right.

Ted walked away from them to the edge of the butte, and stood looking over the dreary stretch before him. He was battling with himself. If harm had come to Stella he alone was to blame, for he had insisted upon leaving her there without protection. Why hadn't he thought to leave two or three of the boys with her as a guard? It was one of the worst blunders of his career, and he almost hated himself for making it.

But as he looked a new light came into his face, and he whipped out his field-glasses and trained them on a point in the distance.

"Boys," he shouted, "I have found them. Look! That square-topped butte between those two chimneys to the southwest."

"Jumpin' sand-hills, it's shore them!" cried Bud. "And I see a straight shoot to ther place."

"Lead the way, Bud, and hit up the pace. We have Stella to fight for now."

CHAPTER XII.

TED STRONG CONQUERS THE OUTLAW.

Straight as an arrow, almost, the young rough riders, led by Ted and Bud, galloped through the narrow cañons,

veering now and then from the straight path, but going always in the same general direction, so true was Bud's eye and his memory for the trail.

As they drew nearer their goal Ted grew steadier, and began to work out a campaign of attack.

He knew that Ramsey would not have the following he had were he not a shrewd and resourceful campaigner.

It was hardly within the possibilities that he would not expect an attack from Ted, or that he was not prepared for it.

So, when they came within a reasonable distance of the butte, Ted ordered a halt in a small valley, about an eighth of a mile away, while he and Bud made a reconnaissance.

Dismounting they crept forward.

It was not the easiest thing for them to recognize the particular butte they were seeking, even when they should come to it.

They looked around them, and could see two or three places, any one of which might have been the right one.

"I'm going up the side of this one to take a look around," said Ted, pointing to the wall at his left. "It is not a hard one to climb, and we can get the direction from the top, and mark the course."

"Guess I'd better go along," said Bud. "Two of us can figure it out easier than one."

"Come along."

When they arrived at the top, after an almost perpendicular climb, they flattened themselves out on the surface, and with the aid of the field-glasses had no difficulty in locating Ramsey's butte.

It was only a short distance away, and of about the same height as the one they were on. Indeed, it was within rifle-shot, and this suggestion gave Ted an idea. He would use this butte for a decoy.

Now that they had their bearings Ted examined Ramsey's camp particularly. There was a bunch of horses in a rope corral at one end of the butte, which indicated that there must be an easy ascent to it.

Through his glasses he could see the men grouped around Ramsey, whom he recognized by his superior height. Some one was apparently relating a story from the intent postures of the men.

Ted looked in vain for Stella.

Nevertheless, he felt sure that she was there somewhere.

A careful search among the horses in the rope corral revealed the fact that the outlaw was among them, but as far as Ted could see it was as gentle as any of the others.

After another vain search for Stella they descended to the bottom, and crept forward with more caution, because they did not know but Ramsey might have sentinels out.

At last they came to Ramsey's butte, and circled it to find, if possible, an easy ascent. On the west side of the butte was a sloping ledge about three feet wide leading from the bottom to the top. This was the very thing for their purpose.

As they were looking up at it a fellow stepped from behind an angle of the passage, and stared at them.

He suddenly realized, however, that here were spies, and was just opening his mouth to shout a warning to his companions, when Ted leaped upon him, caught him by the throat, and choked off the alarm. Bud bound the fellow, who struggled so hard to tear himself loose from his captors, and to bite a piece out of the hand that was pressed over his mouth to keep him from shouting, that Bud was compelled to give him a jolting blow on the chin, which put a quietus on him. He was then securely gagged, and dragged by the heels around a corner and out of sight.

This done, they hurried back to the boys.

"Now, fellows, here's the thing to do," said Ted, as they rode along in a body. "This butte is the one from which we saw them in camp. Ben, I wish you and Ponk would go up there, and in a half-hour or so, giving us time to get to our stations, begin with a few rifle-shots into the camp. Do not aim to kill any one, but kick up the dust a bit. You have smokeless-powder cartridges, and when you crawl along on the top you will find a natural breastworks. Conceal yourself behind that, lying flat, and you will not be seen. When you see us appear on the opposite of the butte cease firing. Watch us for awhile, and if we seem to need assistance come as fast as you can."

"I savvy," said Ben. "Now run along, for I'm anxious to do some rifle-practise. I'm going to see how close I can come to those fellows without hitting any of them. We'll do some fancy shooting with our automatics that will make them think there's a whole company of sharpshooters at work somewhere up in the clouds."

Under the direction of Ted the boys crept around the bluffs until they were at the foot of the ledge that led to the top.

"Wait here until I signal you to come," said Ted, running rapidly up the ledge.

When he got so far that he could look over the top he took off his hat, and carefully raised his head.

The sight that met his gaze aroused in him feelings of horror and anger. In the center of the space on top Ramsey was holding the outlaw horse by a bridle, and was striking it repeatedly over the head with a large club. The horse was cringing before him with hanging head, uttering moans of agony.

It was all Ted could do to restrain himself from running to the rescue of the horse. But around the brute was grouped his gang of ruffians, and it would have been equivalent to suicide to have shown himself at that moment.

After the human brute had beaten the poor brute of a horse to its knees he laughed, and Ted heard him shout to his fellows:

"The next fellow who tackles the Killer will get all that I have beaten into him."

So this was the secret of the animal's madness. Ted saw through it all now. Ramsey, while he was manager for Captain Crittenden, had systematically abused the horse, destroying its temper, and teaching it to attack and destroy any human creature that opposed it, seeing all men as one through its blood-stained eyes.

But there was another mystery connected with the matter.

How did it happen that Ramsey, the one who beat the animal into a state of madness, was able to handle and control it?

There must be some means of controlling it, and doubtless Ramsey, who had trained it, was the only one who knew the secret. This secret he must learn if he would capture and ride it back to Mrs. Crittenden.

Ramsey led the exhausted beast back to the corral, and left it a sorry and dejected animal among its more fortunate fellows.

As he returned to the camp Ted looked at him closely. Indeed, he looked his name, Black Hawk, given him by Mrs. Crittenden, for a more cruel face Ted had seldom seen. It had cruelty and murder written in every line of it.

Ted was wondering why his sharpshooters did not begin firing, when there was a ping in the air and the unmistakable song of a rifle-ball, followed by a little kick-up of dust close to where Ramsey and his men were standing in a circle talking.

Instantly confusion reigned in the camp.

Men ran here and there, buckling on revolvers, and staring in all directions to locate the source of the shot.

While they were so engaged five or six balls came singing through the air, in such rapid succession as to seem to have been fired simultaneously.

The balls struck everywhere about the camp, but no one had been hit.

The members of the gang were hopping about like chickens with their heads off, firing their revolvers indiscriminately, for they did not know from which direction the bullets were fired. They might have come from any point of the compass, or from several.

Ted was laughing silently to see how easily his point was being gained. The few shots from the other height had thrown Ramsey and his gang into a panic. They were rushing here and there without leadership or without reason.

Ted beckoned the boys to his side, and they crept up cautiously until they were all well hidden, yet ready at any moment to spring to the top.

The time was coming. Ramsey was the one to lead the rout. He started on a run directly toward Ted, his men at his heels.

This was the very thing Ted most wanted.

When Ramsey was not farther than fifteen feet from the ledge Ted signaled, and, giving the long yell, the boys vaulted to the top and faced the flying mob.

This was too much for Ramsey. As a volley of pistol-shots went slashing over his head at close range, he stopped.

With a yell of terror he threw up both hands and went over backward, falling against the man next following, who also went down, and the man behind, unable to stop, went sprawling at full-length upon him. In a moment the confusion was complete.

Ted and the boys sprang among the fellows, and easily and speedily disarmed every one of them, although in several instances it took severe mauling to accomplish it.

"Stand up!" shouted Ted to Ramsey. The gambler and murderer did as he was bade. He was white and shaking as if with the palsy.

"Up, you fellows, and stand in line, so that we may see what breed of cattle you are," commanded Ted.

The reluctant ones were urged to obey by having revolvers stuck under their noses.

Ted looked them all over, and then gave the command:

"Right face. March!"

When he got them back to their camp he detailed several of the boys to cut up a lariat, which they found lying on the ground, and tie the hands of all behind their backs, after which they were tied to stakes driven in the ground sufficiently far apart to keep them from helping one another.

"Now," said Ted, facing Ramsey, "tell me truly, and tell me quickly, what have you done with Miss Fosdick?"

"Find her," answered Ramsey, with a ghastly sneer.

"I certainly shall do that. I am here for that purpose. But if I find that she has come to any harm through you I swear that you will suffer the agony of a thousand deaths!"

"I have not seen her. I do not know where she is," said the gambler, with trembling lips.

"I'll give you ten minutes to find out."

Ted walked away to where the boys were standing, and took out his watch, which he held in the palm of his hand. Ramsey eyed him with fear. Then he began to talk excitedly with his men.

The ten minutes were up, and Ted replaced the watch in his pocket and walked over to Ramsey.

"Well?" he said.

"I cannot find out. I do not know where she was put, and those who hid her won't tell me."

"All right, we'll find her. She will know which of you is to blame, and then I'll take it out of all of you."

Ted's look made the gambler quail.

"Hike out in all directions, and search for Stella," he said to the boys, in a low tone. "Ben, will you and Ponk stand guard over these cattle? If one of them makes a false move, plug him. We can't afford to take any chances until we get Stella."

The boys had thoroughly searched the top of the butte, but did not find her, although they were sure that she must be somewhere near.

It was Bud who thought of the fellow whom they had captured, bound, and gagged at the foot of the ledge, and he and Kit ran there with all speed.

They found their captive where they had thrown him, writhing in an effort to break his bonds.

Stepping over him they ran into the passage, which proved to be very short, and closed at the end. There they found Stella lying on the ground, tied hand and foot, and with a handkerchief twisted and bound across her mouth. It took only an instant to release her.

"Thank Heaven you came when you did!" she cried. "I believe I should have died of anxiety if you had not. You were so near me once I could hear you all talking, and then pistol shots, cheers, and yells, and I didn't know how it came out, for everything was so quiet after that. Where is Ted?"

"He's up lookin' after our guests on ther top floor. But what's this?"

Bud was pointing to a white pony standing in the passage.

"Oh, that was left there to carry me away on if any of you appeared, and that ruffian there was to be my guard. The gentleman's name is Bill Bones, and he is the fellow who took me away from the place where Ted told me to stay until he came."

"Well, from what I hear about him he'll be sure enough bones by the time the courts up at Cheyenne get through with him," said Kit. "They have been looking for him, lo, these many moons. Bud, you look after Stella, and I take Billy, old boy, up to get in line with his fellow vultures."

While this was going on in the blind passage another murder was being attempted on the top of the butte.

Ted was walking across toward the corral where the horses of the desperadoes, including the outlaw, were confined.

He was within twenty feet of the corral when Ramsey uttered a loud, shrill whistle.

There came a terrible equine scream from within the corral. Ted knew it. He had heard it before, and he stopped for a moment, rooted to the ground with horror.

A commotion of great proportions was taking place within the corral.

The next instant the mad horse came bounding over the rope, and stood glaring about with bloodshot eyes. Finally they alighted on Ted, who now realized that Ramsey had summoned the horse to murder.

But he had no time for thoughts. The instant demanded action. Almost before he knew it the brute was upon him.

Ted leaped aside with the agility of a bull-fighter, and the horse stopped also, and looked confused for a moment.

He wheeled for another rush, and as he did so Ted decided upon a plan of action.

Ben was rushing across the butte with cocked rifle to kill the horse.

Bud, walking beside Stella, who was riding the white pony, had just appeared upon the surface from the ledge, and both of them took in the situation at a glance.

The mad horse had started on its charge. As Ted dodged it again he turned and sprang for it.

His hand clutched its mane, and the other rested upon its flank. With a bound he was upon the brute's back.

Such a cheer as went up from the boys was never heard before in Wyoming.

But Ted was too busy to respond. The mad horse was taking prodigious leaps into the air. It had been long since he had felt a man upon his back, and it enraged him the more. All through his wild career he had worn a bridle, because he had been unable to tear it off, and no man had dared remove it.

Ted grasped the reins, and dug his knees into the brute's sides with a viselike grip.

For several minutes the spectators could hardly distinguish the motions of the animal, so incredibly swift were they.

The Killer was reaching around, trying to get Ted's leg between its teeth, and it took all Ted's strength to pull its head straight again.

Stella was watching the performance with white face.

Suddenly she darted forward on her white pony.

As she approached him she shouted:.

"Courage, Ted!"

Ted needed all he possessed at that moment.

"Watch him," cried Stella. "He'll kill you if you give him the least bit of rein."

She was quite close to him now, and leaning over said to him quite slowly and distinctly:

"Reach down and place your hand on his neck close to the shoulder. That is the secret of his control."

Ted understood, and did as he was bade.

In an instant the horse became as quiet as a family buggy-horse, and permitted Ted to pat his neck and lavish other caresses on him.

"Stella, you have saved me. How did you know this?"

"I heard Ramsey tell the gang this morning the secret of how he had taught Rex to kill, and how he had taught him to forget his rage until he was beaten again. But I overheard other confessions of his murder of Captain

Crittenden and others. His men heard him, and from the way they hate him there is no doubt they will testify against him."

"Stella, they can't beat you. There's only one like you in all the world."

"Quit your joshing," said Stella, blushing.

When Ted rode the outlaw into the camp, and it obeyed his every command, there was joy among the boys, but rage in the heart of Black Hawk. He had played his last card and lost.

"All ready for the march to Cheyenne, and prison and the gallows," commanded Ted. "I will ride Rex, the reformed outlaw. Stella, you may ride Sultan, if you wish."

There remains little else to be told of the subjugation of the outlaw. He was won back to his old-time health, intelligence, and gentleness by love and kindness, while his evil genius, Ramsey, was being tried for the murder of his master.

Ramsey was convicted on the testimony of his own men, and that of Stella, who told of her capture by Bill Bones, and how she had overheard Ramsey boast of the murder, and how he had encouraged the murderous propensities of the horse. Not many members of the gang escaped prison.

Ted, in restoring Rex to Mrs. Crittenden, refused to accept the reward she had offered for him, and she turned the money over to the Home for Disabled and Destitute Cowboys in Cheyenne, as the contribution of Ted Strong, King of the Wild West.

THE END.

"King of the Wild West at the Throttle; or, Stella in the Flames," is the title of No. 135 of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, following this issue. It is an intensely exciting tale, which serves to show further the splendid courage of Ted Strong and his dashing girl pard, Stella Fosdick, as well as the versatility of the King of the Wild West, who has a genius for turning his hand to anything the emergency calls for. On this occasion he is the instrument by which not only one life is saved, but the lives of a whole town. In all his career Ted Strong never did a braver act, nor risked his life for others as many times as he does in this series of adventures.

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE TIP TOP WEEKLY

WE receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

MEDAL LIBRARY

No.
150—Frank Merriwell's Schooldays.
167—Frank Merriwell's Chums.
178—Frank Merriwell's Foes.
184—Frank Merriwell's Trip West.
189—Frank Merriwell Down South.
193—Frank Merriwell's Bravery.
197—Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour.
201—Frank Merriwell in Europe.
205—Frank Merriwell at Yale.
209—Frank Merriwell's Sports Afield.
213—Frank Merriwell's Races.
217—Frank Merriwell's Bicycle Tour.
225—Frank Merriwell's Courage.
229—Frank Merriwell's Daring.
233—Frank Merriwell's Athletes.
237—Frank Merriwell's Skill.
240—Frank Merriwell's Champions.
244—Frank Merriwell's Return to Yale.
247—Frank Merriwell's Secret.
251—Frank Merriwell's Danger.
254—Frank Merriwell's Loyalty.
258—Frank Merriwell in Camp.
262—Frank Merriwell's Vacation.
267—Frank Merriwell's Cruise.

MEDAL LIBRARY

No.
271—Frank Merriwell's Chase.
276—Frank Merriwell in Maine.
280—Frank Merriwell's Struggle.
284—Frank Merriwell's First Job.
288—Frank Merriwell's Opportunity.
292—Frank Merriwell's Hard Luck.
296—Frank Merriwell's Protégé.
300—Frank Merriwell on the Road.
304—Frank Merriwell's Own Company.
308—Frank Merriwell's Fame.
312—Frank Merriwell's College Chums.
316—Frank Merriwell's Problem.
320—Frank Merriwell's Fortune.
324—Frank Merriwell's New Comedian.
328—Frank Merriwell's Prosperity.
332—Frank Merriwell's Stage Hit.
336—Frank Merriwell's Great Scheme.
340—Frank Merriwell in England.
344—Frank Merriwell on the Boulevards.
348—Frank Merriwell's Duel.
352—Frank Merriwell's Double Shot.
356—Frank Merriwell's Baseball Victories.
359—Frank Merriwell's Confidence.
362—Frank Merriwell's Auto.
365—Frank Merriwell's Fun.

The Price of the Merriwell Books is Ten Cents per Copy. At all Newsdealers

A CHAT WITH YOU.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—The deluge of letters of praise pouring into our editorial rooms has impelled us to open this department, where, from week to week, we may meet our multitude of enthusiastic young readers and answer various questions concerning sports afield. If you desire to know anything connected with outdoor life, hunting, fishing, fur-collecting, or cowboy life on the plains, ask freely, since on our staff we have editors who are thoroughly posted in all that pertains to healthy sport in the open. In many cases we may have to abbreviate letters; but it shall be our aim to print everything that we believe must prove of interest to the great body of readers. We shall also, when not requested otherwise, give the address as an evidence of good faith.

What a fine paper is the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY! I love to read it over and over again. There is nothing like it. This is not exaggerating, because what I say regarding it is only a repetition of what others say about it. I saw a number of sparrows the other day feeding a poor little bird on the roof directly under my window. For several days four or five birds would fly to one corner where a little fellow lay quite helpless, each one carrying a choice morsel in its bill. The little fellow was too small to attempt to fly, and stayed in one spot for several days, while his friends came regularly and fed him. The visiting sparrows never came without something. They would place a few crumbs near him, and then stand by and chirp away until he had eaten it all; then they would all fly away. I watched the birds for several days, and then went out to investigate. When I approached the sparrow who had made the roof his home I noticed that it did not try to fly away! It seemed to be perfectly tame. What was my surprise, when I picked it up and found that the poor creature was blind! Its eyes were covered with a milklike film. Wasn't it wonderful how these birds knew that the other one was unable to get its own food, and came every day to feed it? HARRY ANHUSER.
Jersey City, N. J.

Your account of the sparrows was very interesting. These birds showed a wonderful instinct in realizing that one of their number was perfectly helpless. What a lesson their conduct teaches human beings! Their conduct seemed to be a reminder that we all should treat our fellows who are in trouble with the greatest consideration, and render them what assistance we can.

I am a reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and have been buying it since the first number came out. I like to read about Ted—he is such a hero. What wonderful deeds he performs! I never read of a young fellow who was as brave as the King of the Wild West. Does Ted really dress like some of the cowboys in the pictures I see in store windows? WILLIE GASTON.
Boston, Mass.

You have been fortunate in taking the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY regularly during the last two years. You could not have selected a better library for continual reading. Ted Strong dresses just like other cowboys, who generally are clothed like the men we see in pictures. When Ted gets on his finest cowboy suit and accouterments he makes the ideal cowboy. Ted Strong is so well known in the East, as well as the West, that many famous pictures of cowboys have been inspired by our hero.

I have read quite a lot of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLIES, and I think that they are very good. I have read other novels, but they have too much killing in them for me. GEO. W. SMITH.
Denver, Colo.

There is never anything overdone in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. Its popularity is largely due to the fact that every scene and incident is true to life. There is no straining for effect, such as you find in many other stories.

All ROUGH RIDER books are good for boys to read.
New York City. FRED WHITE.

There is not one story which has appeared in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY that has not pleased our readers. They all say that the stories are everything that can be desired.

I have read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for over a year. I agree with you when you say that it contains the best Western stories published. I have told a few of my friends that it is the best book published. My friends all like the stories, and so do I. Hurrah! for Ted Strong and his comrades.
CHAS. WESTERVELT.

Your friends will always feel grateful to you for bringing to their attention the best weekly ever written for boys and young men. They have not found a dull thing in the stories, and know that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY always has something interesting for them.

I have read the ROUGH RIDER ever since it was published. I think it the real thing. I have read some of the other weeklies, but the ROUGH RIDER knocks them all sky-high!
Brooklyn, N. Y. NORMAN PETERS.

There is not a library that has such interesting stories as those in which we read of Ted Strong and his adventures.

(A letter from Illinois.)

I am a constant reader of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and think it is fine. HARLEY PARKER.
Rockford, Ill.

Ted has won a place in the hearts of all our readers. He has become so famous that there are hundreds of people who have heard of him, though they do not know where he lives, or in what part of the country he has had his numerous adventures.

(A letter from Colorado.)

I have read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for about a year, and think it is fine. I like Ted Strong and all his comrades. I like the stories about the Moon Valley Ranch.
But they are all good, and show that the boys are not afraid of anything. G. S. BEEMER.

The Moon Valley Ranch is a place where Ted and the rough riders have had many adventures.

(A letter from Minnesota.)

I have just finished reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, which I have been reading for nearly a year. I always thought it the greatest book I ever read. I will read it as long as it comes out. LOUIS POSIVIO.

Hundreds of readers say that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the greatest that they have ever read.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

I have read your book, and find it interesting. I think it is all right. Ted Strong is a brave and manly fellow, and I think the rough riders are a brave company. FRANK KIBLER.

There is no more courageous lot of young men than Ted Strong's young rough riders. They have made a world-wide fame for themselves for unflinching bravery.

(A letter from Illinois.)

I am one of the readers of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and think it is among the best books published. I have read the last number, and it was fine. MARSHALL GOLDSBORO.

When Ted gallops over the plains on his wonderful horse, Sultan, he makes a sight that no one who has ever seen him will ever forget.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is one of the best weeklies ever published. I have been reading it for a long time, and will continue to read it. JAMES ANDERSON.

Whenever a person begins to read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, he continues to read it. There is a good reason why he should —there are no better stories for boys and young men than those appearing in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY.

(A letter from Indiana.)

I think that Ted Strong is a very remarkable young man. I also think that he is a very wonderful young man, full of grit, and deserves the title, King of the Wild West. CHARLES DOWDEN.

We all admire Ted Strong for his many fine qualities. He is the best-known young man living in the West to-day.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for over a year, and think they are good stories of the West. I have a good many of them, and some real old ones. JOHN MITING.

We all like to read of the deeds of a heroic young man like Ted Strong. He is the ideal American boy, and deserves all the laurels he has won.

I thought I would write you a short letter telling you how well I liked the last number of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. I think it is the best magazine of its kind published. I shall recommend it to every young man I meet who is hunting for something good to read.

In the last number Mr. Taylor is at his best. Whew! Wouldn't I like to have some of that gold that Ted is always finding.

I want Mr. Ned Taylor to keep right on. Tell him I should like to shake hands with him. LATHARO HOOVER.

New York City.

We should like to hear from you again when you feel like writing.

(A letter from Pennsylvania.)

Being a constant reader of your ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY for over two years, I thought I would take the liberty to tell you how much I like it.

First, I think Ted Strong deserves his title, King of the Wild West. Second, I think he is one of the bravest and greatest heroes. Third, I congratulate the author, and wish him a long life. T. KENNETH BECK.

You have discovered some of the reasons why Ted should be reckoned the hero he is.

I beg leave to say a few words of honor in favor of Ted Strong and his noble band of rough riders. Ted is an example of a true American boy, and is a model for any one to follow. I was getting inclined to keep bad company, but when I started reading the Ted Strong stories it cured me. I would certainly be lost without Ted and the rest of his band of noble boys. I was very much pleased with the last number; but, to tell the truth, all of them are superior to any other five-cent book ever written. HARRY INGLE.

Minneapolis, Minn.

The example of Ted Strong is having a good influence upon the boys of America. They have recognized in Ted a superior young man, and are trying to live up to the standard of ideals he has set before them.

(A letter from Texas.)

I agree with you in saying that they are the best Wild West stories that I ever read. I read all of them that I can get hold of. They and *Tip Top* are all of the weeklies that I care much about. CARL WILLS.

There are hundreds of readers who buy only *Tip Top* and ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, as they have found that these are the two ideal weekly papers for boys and young men.

(A letter from Oklahoma.)

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and find it one of the best story-papers I have ever read. I can hardly wait from one week to another before getting it. I will recommend it to everybody I can. ARTHUR HOWEY.

You have the true spirit of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY reader. Every one who likes the stories in this library makes it a point to tell his friends how fine they are. You are doing just the thing by telling your friends what they will find in it.

(A letter from Massachusetts.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the most interesting story paper I ever read. I take it every week. The last one I bought was the best of all. It has a beautiful cover, which I had framed.

Would you do me a favor by letting me know if you have got the life of "Buffalo Bill" (Colonel Cody), and what the price is? PETER RIVARD.

The adventures of Colonel Cody are published weekly in the series of "Buffalo Bill" stories issued by Street & Smith, price 5c. per copy. They are intensely interesting, and are read by thousands of people.

I have read your book called the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY ever since it came out, and I think that it is about the best. I have nearly all the Ted Strong books. They are very interesting.

Richmond, Va. SAMUEL FOX.

No doubt you have kept all your numbers of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and have a complete file of Mr. Ned Taylor's works. They will be fine to have at hand for reading on a rainy day.

(A letter from California.)

I have read a good many five-cent books, but none suit me as well as the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY. I think Ted Strong is a reliable young man. He is brave and cool in times of danger.

I also think the rest of the boys are all right. They all suit me, for they help to make the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY up to date. A. C. GATZKY.

All the boys in the band of rough riders help to make the stories interesting. Of course, they could not do anything without Ted's assistance, but with him by their side they perform wonders.

(A letter from Iowa.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best of its kind published. I have read a number of books, but find that the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best I have read yet. HARRY BUCK.

Yes; the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best. Continue to read it, and you will never be disappointed.

I have been reading the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY from No. 1 to the latest issue, and think it is a "dandy." I am captain of a club called "The Young Rough Riders." All the members have suits like Ted Strong. This is our cry:

One, two, three,
Who are we?
We are the Rough Riders,
Don't you see.
Are we in it?
Yes, we are;
Ted Strong, Ted Strong!
'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah!

New York City. LANGDON LUTZ.

You and your friends show a great deal of enthusiasm. May you always read the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, and look upon Ted and his band of rough riders as models.

(A letter from Kansas.)

I like the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY better than any other. FRANK VAN WORMER.

The ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is the best library for boys and young men published to-day.

(A letter from California.)

I think the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY is a very good paper dealing with Western life. Ted Strong is a good specimen of the Western man. The library is very good, and contains interesting stories. WILLIE JONES.

Ted Strong represents the ideal young man of the West. He is a good shot, an expert cattleman, a terror to all evil-doers and succeeds in everything he undertakes, no matter how difficult it may be.

COME, BOYS, GET BUSY!

Grand Letter Competition

$100 in Gold Awarded for the Best Letters from Readers of ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

Every one of the 50,000 boys who read the excellent stories of Western adventure published in the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, has some special reason for liking them. One may like the covers; another thinks Ted Strong is just it; another may buy it because he thinks Stella, as a girl pard, cannot be beat.

Now, we intend to make it worth the while of every boy to tell us just what he thinks about the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY and hereby offer valuable prizes to those who write us the best letters regarding the stories themselves; how you may have worked to increase their circulation or what you know about the fascinating life of the modern ranchman, so ably described by our cowboy author, Mr. Ned Taylor. We would particularly appreciate receiving letters from our Western friends.

Do not hesitate about writing; although you may not be so fortunate as to come in for the cash, every contestant will receive a valuable consolation prize.

The first competition opens October 1st and closes January 1st, when a second quarterly contest will begin. The prize winners will be listed early in January so that every one who reads the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY may know who has won. Here are the prizes:

$20.00 in Gold for the Best Letter.
$10.00 in Gold for Each of the Three Next Best Letters.
$5.00 in Gold for Each of the Six Next Best Letters.
$2.00 in Gold for Each of the Ten Next Best Letters.

The letters should not be longer than 250 words and should be plainly addressed to Manager of Rough Rider Letter Competition, care of Street & Smith. Now, boys, jump right in and resolve to win a cash prize.

STREET & SMITH, *Publishers*, New York

THE ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

ISSUED EVERY MONDAY. **HANDSOME COLORED COVER**

Ted Strong wants to make your acquaintance, boys, and we are convinced that you will be proud to have him as a friend. The tales of his adventures among the cowboys are full of fascinating interest. He is known to every one as "King of the Wild West" and he upholds the title.

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HERE ARE THE LATEST TITLES:

116—King of the Wild West's Gulch Diggings; or, Stella's Star Rôle.
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119—King of the Wild West's Wild-Goose Band; or, Stella's Long Flight.
120—King of the Wild West's Galleon; or, Stella's Spanish Treasure.
121—King of the Wild West's Fire Fight; or, Stella in the Burning Forest.
122—King of the Wild West's Bluff; or, How Stella Saved the Day.
123—King of the Wild West's Nerve; or, Stella in the Saddle.
124—King of the Wild West's Helping Hand; or, Stella, the Girl Range-rider.
125—King of the Wild West's Buckskin Guide; or, Stella at the Grand Round-up.
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127—King of the Wild West's Tangled Trail; or, The Disappearance of Stella.
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129—King of the Wild West's Phantom; or, Stella in Danger.
130—King of the Wild West's Broncho-busters; or, Stella's Fort in the Coulée.
131—King of the Wild West's Corral; or, How Stella Brought the Warning.
132—King of the Wild West's Tenderfoot Pard; or, Stella's Surprise Party.
133—King of the Wild West's Night Wrangler; or, What Happened to Stella.
134—King of the Wild West's Outlaw; or, Stella to the Rescue.
135—King of the Wild West at the Throttle; or, Stella in the Flames.
136—King of the Wild West's Trail; or, Stella Finds Bill Blue.
137—King of the Wild West's Race; or, Stella Among the Seris.
138—King of the Wild West's Fire-signal; or, How Stella Foiled the Marauders.
139—King of the Wild West Rides the Line; or, Stella Saves Old Glory.
140—King of the Wild West's Treasure; or, Stella on the Walls of Montezuma.
141—King of the Wild West's Totem; or, Stella Makes a New Maxim.

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Rough Rider Weekly

Ted Strong was appointed deputy marshal by accident, but he resolves to use his authority and rid his ranch of some very tough bullies. He does it in such a slick way that everyone calls him "King of the Wild West" and he certainly deserves his title. $100 in cash are given to the readers of this publication, every three months. Buy a copy and learn how to come in for a share of it.

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These are stories of the adventures of boys who succeeded in climbing the ladder of fame by honest effort. No more interesting tales can be imagined. Each number is at least one-third longer than the ordinary five-cent library.

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The demand for stirring stories of Western adventure is admirably filled by this library. Every up-to-date boy ought to read just how law and order are established and maintained on our Western plains by Diamond Dick, Bertie, and Handsome Harry.

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Buffalo Bill is the hero of a thousand exciting adventures among the Redskins. These are given to our boys only in the Buffalo Bill Stories. They are bound to interest and please you.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

We know, boys, that there is no need of introducing to you Nicholas Carter, the greatest sleuth that ever lived. Every number containing the adventures of Nick Carter has a peculiar, but delightful, power of fascination.

BRAVE AND BOLD

Every boy who prefers variety in his reading matter, ought to be a reader of Brave and Bold. All these were written by authors who are past masters in the art of telling boys' stories. Every tale is complete in itself.

BOWERY BOY LIBRARY

The adventures of a poor waif whose only name is "Bowery Billy." Billy is the true product of the streets of New York. No boy can read the tales of his trials without imbibing some of that resource and courage that makes the character of this homeless boy stand out so prominently.

The Tip Top Weekly

Frank Merriwell and his brother Dick are known and loved by over one hundred and fifty thousand of the best boys in the United States. They are both clean-cut, vigorous fellows who dare to do right no matter what the consequences. Get the current number. We are sure you will like it.